

## Participation and Sacrality: Challenges for Liturgical Space

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In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the fittingness of sacrality within liturgical space has been a point of contention. Catherine R. Osborne's *American Catholics and the Church of Tomorrow: Building Churches for the Future, 1925-1975* describes the shift in American church building from the Neogothic revival of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the design, construction, and dedication of church buildings intended to communicate the ubiquity of sacredness in 20<sup>th</sup> century Catholic life. Osborne accounts for this shift as a change in theological outlook relative to transcendence. The purpose of church design in this era was to erase any distinction between the sacred and the secular, an implication of the Second Vatican Council's *aggiornamento*. Church buildings looked like other structures as a way of underlining that all of life following the Incarnation should be considered sacred. If a church building looked more like a shopping mall or an office building (the reality of much church building in America suburbia), this was not a poor architectural decision but the performance of a theological principle—everywhere the Christian goes is sanctified. The sacred is *ubique et nusquam*.

The theological claim behind this desacralization argument is partially correct. Sacredness in a church building is not reserved exclusively to certain architectural styles or features of design. Further, the Christian is called to the act of sanctifying the world, revealing the sacredness of work, family life, and politics. But the naivety of this claim is its anthropological forgetfulness. As Josef Pieper writes in his *In Search of the Sacred*, "...within the world's total framework of space and time, accessible to man, there do exist specific exceptional

and separated spaces and times, distinct from the ordinary, and therefore possessing a special and unique dignity.”<sup>1</sup> Birth, festive meals, and death are considered exceptional moments in the narrative of a human life, and they are marked by certain actions that acknowledge this separateness. This anthropological orientation toward acknowledging sacrality cannot be re-shaped through fiat. It is engrained in the human person’s very structure, one where the human person is created to discern meaning. Space and time remain the primary modes by which the human person tells the story of his or her life; that is, by which we discover that life is meaningful.

The question, therefore, of the sacredness of ecclesial architecture is not only about aesthetics but the very meaning of what constitutes human existence. This essay takes up this thesis through a careful re-reading of two works by Josef Pieper on the sacred: his *In Search of the Sacred* and his *In Tune with the World: A Theory of Festivity*. The essay attends to three dimensions of Pieper’s argument: first, the desacralization movement in ecclesial architecture is related to a crisis of meaning endemic of a technocratic age; second, Christian sacredness is fundamentally about recognizing the gratuity of creation and redemption in Christ; third, this expression of sacrality will always involve the human person in all his or her embodied, material existence. Ecclesial art, architecture, and even the beauty of popular Catholicism that unfold in

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<sup>1</sup> Josef Pieper, *In Search of the Sacred: Contributions to an Answer*, trans. Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 13.

many of the churches of Rome, therefore, is not merely the concern of the aesthete but essential to all those involved in offering a robust Christian liturgical formation in late modernity.

### **Desacralization and the Technocratic Order**

Josef Pieper's *In Search of the Sacred* was written against arguments presupposing that sacrality was an archaic concept, not appropriated to the more humanistic theological discourse of modernity. The supposition of such theologians is that the division of the world into sacred and profane has erected an impenetrable barrier between the divine and the human. In sacred rites, the Christian encounters God.

Whereas in profane activity, there is nothing even relatively good that is to be found. Pieper himself worries about this division, noting that if this was the meaning of either the sacred or the profane then "a Christian would indeed have to reject the distinction between sacred and profane as unacceptable."<sup>2</sup> Such a distinction would ultimately function as a mode of Gnosticism where the very created order was viewed as utterly deprived of divine gratuity.

Pieper turns to an analogy to offer an alternative account of both the sacred and the profane. Namely, sacrality is to poetry what the prosaic is to the profane. In poetry and ideally philosophy, the goal is "to contemplate the totality of reality and existence in view of ultimate reasons..."<sup>3</sup> Profane discourse is, therefore, not evil but is concerned fundamentally with something that is less than ultimately reality. A profane conversation would unfold as one

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 18.

banker speaks about rising interest rates to another banker. This economic conversation is not intrinsically evil, and in fact it may be quite good for the social order, but it is not the same kind of discourse that unfolds among two lovers addressing the meaning of their love. The former unfolds in the domain of the prosaic or profane, while the latter attends more to the poetic or sacred.

Desacralization seeks to eliminate this distinction, trying to elevate financial conversations to the same domain as love's meaning. But as Pieper implies, the in and outs of financial transactions are not equivalent to the kind of ultimate meaning present in two lovers inquiring about the meaning of love, and therefore life and death alike. The former pertains more to function, the latter to meaning—what Josef Ratzinger would later treat in his *Introduction to Christianity* as the distinction between an attitude dominated by *techne* rather than the contemplative *logos* characteristic of an I-Thou relationship to the cosmos. The attitude of *techne* or makability perceives creation as something to be manipulated for the sake of human development, while the disposition of *logos* is a receptive one, cognizant of the munificence of all that is.

In the case of ecclesial architecture, desacralization was expressed as a move toward liturgical functionalism. Christian buildings for worship are necessary insofar as they are spaces where liturgies can be carried out, but they are not intended ultimately for contemplation.

Liturgy is for doing, not for beholding.<sup>4</sup> Much of the iconoclasm of mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century liturgical architecture has been dependent on this assumption— the building “works” because it is a space where rites can be carried out. Pieper partially agrees with this claim, often underlining that the act of the Eucharistic sacrifice can transform a prison cell or a barn into a sacred space.<sup>5</sup> It is the act of worship itself that consecrates or sanctifies. Nonetheless, he also states that human acts can be carried out in a way that is not reducible to mere function:

...how entirely normal it is for man to act not merely with a practical goal in mind but also, every now and then, with the intention of setting a sign—be this only the gesture of lighting a candle, *not* to brighten the room but rather to express the festive atmosphere of the moment, or of remembering a deceased loved one or of offering worship and thanksgiving.<sup>6</sup>

The desacralization of ecclesial architecture is a preference for function over form, for the practical dimensions of the church building over the contemplative vocation to behold what exists within the space of a church. The consequence of such desacralization is not only the loss of art within that church but a crisis of sacramentality, the capacity to see the symbolism of ecclesial architecture and art (and therefore the cosmos itself) as anything more than functional.

Functionality in worship is a mode of amnesia, forgetting that within churches rites are not only carried out by human actors but the living God is encountered in worship: “All those

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<sup>4</sup> This claim, in fact, is found often in 20<sup>th</sup> century liturgical and sacramental theology, particularly discernable in the thought of Louis-Marie Chauvet, which is mostly bereft of concerns related to perception or properly the science of aesthetics.

<sup>5</sup> One should note here recent arguments about the origins of house churches, which were not so much houses occasionally used as churches but rather as houses (or other kinds of buildings) that were transformed into churches in the first centuries of Christianity. See Stefan Heid, *Altar and Church: Principles of Liturgy from Early Christianity*.

<sup>6</sup> Piper, *In Search of the Sacred*, 42.

'desacralisation' crusades...are ultimately rooted...in just such a denial of any sacramental reality. They rest on the conviction that this action, perhaps still called 'sacred,' in truth a purely human performance in which—objectively and independently from our imagination—*nothing at all happens*, least of all a real presence of the divine.”<sup>6</sup> In essence, Pieper diagnoses desacralization as a crisis of metaphysics, one where there is nothing to behold in any human act or dimension of creation than what is immediately visible to the eye. The language of efficacious sign is evacuated since nothing remains except the play of signifiers (or perhaps, the lack thereof).

Thus, Pieper is not concerned about aesthetics per se but the loss of the human capacity to receive the world as a meaningful gift that transcends the initial act of beholding. The human being in late modernity has forgotten how to take up a festive, contemplative posture toward reality: “For many cannot have the experience of receiving what is loved, unless the world and existence as a whole represent something good and therefore beloved to him.”<sup>7</sup> Such a crisis is linked as much to the created order as the arts. Human beings look upon a gorgeous desert landscape, thinking about it only as a potential resource for harvesting rare earth elements to produce digital devices designed for replacement every two years. Likewise, time itself is measured exclusively in the domain of calculation, especially when the proper use of time can

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 29-30.

<sup>7</sup> Josef Pieper, *In Tune with the World: A Theory of Festivity*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 1965), 26.

generate income. Pieper's devastating diagnosis is fundamentally a concern about the human loss of a contemplative, festive vision toward the world.

In this, Pieper shares much in common with Pope Francis' own description of a technocratic order where creation and the human person itself is reduced to the category of "use." For Pope Francis, the leisure of Sunday is intended to reform the human person in a way of beholding, in looking at all of creation as a gift. So too ecclesial architecture, art, and even popular devotion celebrated in such churches are occasions of gratuity. A column is never merely a pragmatic solution to create a raised roof but decorated with images of trees or flowers, inviting all of creation into the worship of the Church. Chant is not about creating efficient speech but elevating human words in such a way that their importance is recognized even by the young child. Rose petals dropped through the oculus of the Pantheon may be a waste of money, but they are also festive and contemplative signs of Pentecost joy. The hidden wonder of water and therefore baptism itself is made manifest in the augustness decorative program of the Lateran's baptistry.

Pieper, it should be remembered, is not an aesthete. He does not see such visible signs of sacrality as an excuse for excessive spending—a kind of liturgical dandyism that may often be found among certain traditionalists. Rather, the beauty of the sacred is "...the spontaneous expression of an inner richness, indeed, of that richness flowing from experiencing the true presence of God among his people."<sup>8</sup> The aesthetic or perceptible beauty of a church building is

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<sup>8</sup> Pieper, *In Search of the Sacred*, 44.

a return gift of love by people to God, one created and given for the sake of later generations. Such festive contemplation, though, ironically achieves precisely what the desacralization of ecclesial spaces thought it could—the union of the sacred and the profane. As Pieper comments in his *In Tune with Festivity*, “real festivity...seizes and permeates all dimensions of existence—so that from a mere description of the proceedings we cannot easily tell where a festival is ‘really’ a social, economic, athletic, or church event, a fair, a dance, or a feast.”<sup>9</sup> Consider what happens on a Sunday morning as pilgrims crowd into St. Peter’s square for a papal Mass. The central reason for the gathering is, of course, the celebration of the Eucharist. But alongside this gathering, one discovers the festivity of a gathering of human beings made possible through the very spatial design of the square, Bernini’s arms inclusive of saints throughout the West welcome pilgrims from around the world. Following Mass, the exuberance of young people looking to climb the cupola on a warm Sunday afternoon or pilgrims off to lunch is linked to the festivity. The time set apart in the silent adoration of a piazza unlike any other invites the union of sacrality and life.

The setting apart evident in sacrality is therefore not intended to separate anyone from the goodness of life. Rather, such festivity is a medicine for an age where everything tends to be reduced to a consumer or economic good. Sacred worship, including the arts, manifest that the human person is called to participate in an eternal festival, one where the ultimate meaning of existence is not production or consumption but gratitude for all that has been given.

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<sup>9</sup> Pieper, *In Tune with Festivity*, 33.



## Sacred Narrative and Ecclesial Art

It is commonplace in Roman Catholicism to treat ecclesial art as the *biblia pauperum*. In an illiterate culture such art was necessary but in literate societies such art distracts from the central actions of the liturgy. Liturgy is fundamentally about doing, not about seeing or beholding.

Of course, this account of art (although true in a limited manner) was always insufficient. The design underlying programs of stained glass in medieval Europe, mosaics in Ravenna, or even the decoration of liturgical vestments cannot be reduced to teaching the illiterate about salvation history. Liturgical art possesses a certain sacramental function, enabling liturgical participants to participate in the narrative of salvation that underlines the serious sacrality of Christian liturgy.

For Pieper, the human being responds to the sacred by keeping a feast. The general account of festivity for the human person is “...to live out, for some special occasion and in an uncommon manner, the universal assent to the world as a whole.”<sup>10</sup> The feast is a celebration and therefore it is concurrently a memorial of a narrative that is received. For the Christian, as Pieper argues, the special occasion par excellence is the resurrection of Christ. Sunday and Easter are the two Christian feasts *par excellence*.

Sunday is, of course, the remembrance of the resurrection of Christ but it is also the Christian remembrance of the Sabbath and therefore the goodness of all creation. The

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 30.

Easter remembrance for Pieper is no mere recalling the event of the Resurrection (as a great once upon a time) but a making present of that event here and now: "...the reason and occasion for this [Easter] festival is that in Christ's Resurrection something began by which man's life ever since, and today and for all the future, received that incomprehensible exaltation that the language of theology calls Grace and New Life."<sup>11</sup> The human person discovered in the celebration of Easter, which happens every Sunday, a narrative that can make sense of the totality of one's life: all of human life has been taken up into Christ, transformed through the death and resurrection of the Lord.

The art of the ecclesial environment provides an entrée into that narrative. Take a narrative that many here would know quite well, the mosaic found in Santa Maria in Trastevere. The mosaic depicts the resurrected Christ with the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of the Church, with his arm wrapped around her. Surrounding Christ and the Church are papal figures important to St. Mary's. The mosaic apse is itself decorated in gold, luminous to behold. Above the head of Christ is a hand, the anointing of the Father revealing Jesus as no mere mortal but as the son of the Father. The Scriptural text is from the Song of Songs, "His left hand is under my head, and his right hand shall embrace me" (2:6, 8:3).

The narrative layers in this mosaic apse are manifold. Here is an image of the tenderness of Christ, the Son of God and the son of Mary, wrapping his mother in the mantle of his glory. The human quality to Christ is unmistakable, the tenderness of God dwelling among mortals. But one should not stop there. Mary is the Mother of the Church. And the words of the Song of

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 49.

Songs reveal the very same tenderness shown not only to Christ's mother but to all those who belong to this body. At every Mass or moment of prayerful contemplation, the believer can see him or herself as part of this narrative. God's tenderness extends even to me, who longs for Christ to wrap his arm around me through the life of the sacraments, the graced existence of the Christian who is called to perceive his or her narrative through this grand activity of divine redemption.

This apse mosaic is doing a lot more than teaching the Bible to the illiterate. It makes present, through the materiality of art, the very event of salvation that the Christian has come to celebrate on this feast. Ecclesial art makes possible the celebration of the liturgy as an entrance into the sacred mysteries of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. Like all the sacraments, this immersion into the mystery is not magic, a point Pieper underlines in his *In Search of the Sacred*. One may have an improper attitude toward ecclesial art, the kind often found in the aesthete who is more interested in encountering the art produced by famous artists rather than art that makes possible devotion.

Rather, all ecclesial art must take on a certain iconic form, an objectivity that woos one into the mystery of salvation. Here, as the Church celebrates the Jubilee of artists, there is a two-fold task. First, much art already exists in Rome, the kind of sacred art that is an invitation toward contemplation of the sacred mysteries celebrated in the liturgy. Michaelangelo's *Pieta* is no mere object to take a selfie in front of but is, as Ann Astell has properly argued in her *Eating Beauty: The Eucharist and the Spiritual Arts*, a kind of statutory, Eucharistic altarpiece. Those giving tours can invite pilgrims to look upon Michaelangelo's *Pieta* or the Sistine Chapel not as

“famous” spectacles worth beholding (or capturing via a digital device) but as an iconic encounter with the mystery of salvation. Second, as Pieper himself notes, sacred art and space need not be reduced to that which is “old.” Rather, even modern architecture may find a place in the Church’s tradition of worship. But as Pieper notes, it will be necessary that each new building be “...erected as shelter for the one and ever identical ‘sacred action’ that makes such a building, in name and in fact, an *aedes sedes*, a sacred space.”<sup>12</sup> Here, the Jubilee of Artists might spur on new formation programs for artists who are formed not only in the necessary dispositions for creating art itself but also in those liturgical habits necessary for those who are liturgical worshippers themselves.

The challenge, in both cases, is to remember the sacramental quality of art as immersing the viewer, listener, or singer into the mystery of salvation. Sacred art, in all of its forms, is narrative in scope—taking up the beholder or listener into a narrative outside of the self. A liturgical formation for the lay faithful must invite men and women to look at such images in this way. It is a devotional beholding, the kind quite distinct from the idolatrous gaze of a digital culture where “looking” is more about capturing a spectacle to present to others.

### **The Materiality of Worship**

Considering the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, much focus has been put upon the texts of the sacred liturgy, especially since such texts are not comprehensible to the entirety of the faithful. The comprehensibility of such texts indeed is an invitation toward deeper

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<sup>12</sup> Pieper, *In Search of the Sacred*, 119.

contemplation itself, a poetic immersion of the worshipper into the event of salvation. The language of the liturgy, in the vernacular, can become an immersion into the sacrality of the liturgical act, one where the Paschal Mystery of Christ transforms the humanity of the worshipper in the sacramental life: “O God, who wonderfully created the dignity of human nature and still more wonderfully restored it, grant, we pray, that we may share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever.”

But the danger of the almost exclusive focus on liturgical comprehensibility is a failure to grasp the full anthropology of the human person engaged in the liturgical act. Pieper, in his *In Search of the Sacred*, refers to his teacher’s Romano Guardini’s republished 1966 *Liturgy and Liturgical Formation*. Here, Pieper specially mentions Guardini’s claim—drawn from Aquinas—that the soul is the life form of the body. Quoting Guardini:

Now, there are certainly religious attitudes that emphasize the *spiritual* and *interior* dimension, the wordless prayer in which man strives to God in silence, faces him, or just remains open to God in expectation. The liturgy is different: in it, man in his wholeness is the center with all his actions and attitudes. At the height of this perfection, man is not supposed to lose his body; quite the opposite, he will become—in the truest sense of the word—ever more human. This means that in the liturgical act his bodiliness strives always more toward interiority and spirituality, while his soul becomes continually more expressed in his body, becoming bodily in a certain sense.<sup>13</sup>

Liturgical formation, for Guardini, is therefore never reducible to “telling people things about things,” a kind of verbal education in which the primary purpose is informing someone of the

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<sup>13</sup> Romano Guardini, *Liturgy and Liturgical Formation*, trans. Jan Bentz (Chicago: LTP, 2022), 21.

meaning of a specific act. Rather, the liturgical act is embodied through and through since the pedagogy of the liturgy depends on exteriority become interior and an interiority expressed progressively more through the body.

Because of this fact, the human person is capable of symbolism. The symbolic is not the unreal but the human capacity to make use of the material for the sake of the spiritual. Light is never mere light alone but the light that illuminates the darkness, which takes away the terror of both space and time in a flickering candle. Eating is not the sheer replenishment of nourishment but the common human act of giving thanks for all that has been received, an act that is done not as monads but in the communion of one's fellow mortals.

Both Guardini and Pieper, though, worry that human beings have increasingly lost this symbol-making and symbol-receiving capacity. Such a concern, in fact, has been raised by Pope Francis in his *Desiderio Desideravi*:

With post-modernity people feel themselves even more lost, without references of any sort, lacking in values because they have become indifferent, completely orphaned, living a fragmentation in which [a] horizon of meaning seems impossible. And so it is even more weighed down by the burdensome inheritance that the previous epoch left us, consisting in individualism and subjectivism (which evokes once again the Pelagian and gnostic problems). It consists also in an abstract spiritualism which contradicts human nature itself, for a human person is an incarnate spirit and therefore as such capable of symbolic action and of symbolic understanding (no. 28).

And yet, the way forward for Pieper, Guardini, and Pope Francis alike is through fostering those occasions of embodied wonderment. The liturgy is just as much about what we do with our bodies, with the lively gaze that ponders the mystery of salvation, as it is about the words that are spoken.

Liturgical art and architecture, therefore, has a privileged role to play in this wider sense of liturgical formation. Churches can never be reduced to preaching halls within the liturgical and sacramental economy of Roman Catholicism. They are spaces to be suffused with the materiality of the human condition—contrary to Guardini’s own sense that a reduced symbolic currency was necessary for the postmodern person. Through the church building, the *ecclesia* gives expression to her very existence in the medium of sign and symbol alike.

Such symbols, of course, include the core materiality of the liturgy including bread, wine, oil, water, and the human hand. But it is inclusive, as Guardini himself points out in his *Sacred Signs*, of the church bell ringing out over the countryside, the main altar composed of stone, the rising and setting of the sun, and the human voice raised in song. The liturgy is this material enactment, possessing a meaning that never moves beyond but is inclusive of the physical act. The bell is a material symbol, an icon, of the presence of Christ as sanctifying all time and space. Kneeling in the liturgy is not the mere expression of some prior interior attitude but the very performance of adoration and penance integral to Christian liturgical prayer. The voice crying out in praise to God as *Gloria in excelsis deo* is not only informative of the universal vocation to praise but is an analogical exercise of such praise of the *communio sanctorum* in pilgrimage before God.

In other words, matter matters—especially in the liturgical arts—because Christian culture depends on such symbol making and receiving in the liturgical act. But it concurrently reminds human beings, especially following the Enlightenment, that art is not a mere ancillary dimension of the human experience—a phenomenon exclusively for those

interested in cultivating good taste. Rather, art is integral to the human experience, a phenomenon whereby the artist gives symbolic expression to the embodied, meaningful nature of human existence through the medium of the senses. The Church promotes the arts, both relative to the act of preservation and the creation of new arts, because the more this symbol making and receiving capacity increases among the human race, the more this same race of creatures will rediscover its liturgical vocation to return the totality of creation unto God.

Such liturgical art will be accessible just as much to the young child as to the adult, who walks into a church building noticing that at the center of the triumphant arch (to return to our earlier discussion of St. Mary's) is the God-man and his mother. Even if the child is not able to yet determine who these persons are, as is the case of the infant, the same child can behold the shimmering gold of the apse. Such primordial wonder unfolds not only in a city like Rome—one where aesthetic displays full of such *spectacolo* are evident to anyone who beholds these churches. Rather, it is primordial to the human condition, the original language of the liturgical act where bodies worship the living God using signs and symbols. Such worship is no human activity alone but is the privileged means by which God has decided to save human beings, not apart from the flesh and blood self, but through our very material condition. Here, at last, is the law of the Incarnation, that flesh can only be saved through flesh—flesh that has been transfigured, glorified, appearing in glorious form.