Frank Kacmarcik and the Cistercian Architectural Tradition

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A number of contemporary critics of the Vatican II reforms of the liturgy have accused the reformers of being unduly influenced by the tenets of the Enlightenment. Most of the fathers of the council and the members of the Consilium who were responsible for implementing the liturgical directives of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy would be surprised and probably chagrined by the accusation. Included here would be the names of Giacomo Cardinal Lercaro, Franz Cardinal König, Archbishop Denis Hurley, Pierre-Marie Gy, Pierre Jounel, Balthasar Fischer, Godfrey Diekmann, James Crichton, and Frederick McManus. These distinguished scholars were above all steeped in the history of the Church, especially the patristic period; they were not friends of philosophical modernity. Furthermore there has been the charge that architects and liturgical consultants responsible for the construction and reform of church buildings in the last forty years have simply opted for mathematical rationalism and dualism and have been basically anti-traditional.[1]

There is no doubt that after the council many contemporary church buildings were hastily renovated simply so that Mass could be celebrated facing the people, and that new churches have been built by incompetent architects who have had little sense of liturgical tradition and have responded poorly to liturgical briefs set out in official church documents. Those documents rightly emphasize the importance of the entire liturgical assembly as the primary celebrant of the liturgy and the consequent importance of the altar, baptistry, ambo, and presider's chair.

Frank Kacmarcik was certainly not influenced by either modern or post-modern philosophers nor by the spirit of the Enlightenment. He was influenced primarily by his early association with the Benedictine monastic tradition and formed by that tradition. In the 1940s he entered the Benedictine novitiate at Saint John's Abbey in Collegeville where he worked closely with Brother Clem-

ent Frishauf, OSB, an influential liturgical artist trained in the Beuronese school of religious art.[2] Brother Clement became a devoted mentor, inspiring Frank to see himself as a faithful disciple of this influential but humble liturgical artist. Other monks who contributed to his early spiritual formation were Fathers Gregory Roettger, OSB, and Paschal Botz, OSB.

Frank's early artistic style was both challenged and broadened after the Second World War by his experience at the Acadèmie de la Grand Chaumière and the Centre d'Art Sacré in Paris. During his teaching years at Saint John's University in the early nineteen-fifties and for many years thereafter he was profoundly affected by his friendship with Father Michael Marx, OSB, whose life and scholarship were deeply rooted both in biblical studies and in the early monastic tradition.[3] When Frank first met with potential clients who were interested in either renovating an existing church or building a new one, his primary concerns were ecclesiological. He inquired about and insisted that the community come to grips with very basic questions: Who have you been as a community? Who are you now? And who do you want to become? Especially when working with monastic communities, he was aware of the Benedictine tradition and the emphasis that the experience of God flourishes in a climate of hospitality in which people are present to one another as the body-persons they are, as members of the body of Christ, comfortable with one another, gathered together with each other, capable of seeing and hearing all that is enacted within the worshiping assembly. He insisted that an attractive beauty in all that is said and done, used or observed is the best way to facilitate the experience of God as mystery, for God is not only goodness and truth, God is also beauty. He asserted that it is above all God's Spirit in our hearts and communities that gives access to the otherness, the transcendence, and holiness of God.

Certainly the New Testament, which is normative for Christians in their evaluation of their life of faith, asserts the primacy of persons and communities over things. It is the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ celebrated by the Christian assembly that provides the foundational meaning for all places of worship. Their meaning is always derivative; apart from the centrality of the paschal mystery and the assembly which is the body of Christ, they easily degenerate into mere monuments, often very impressive monuments, but monuments none the less. The buildings themselves certainly have a symbolic meaning, but that meaning should be

rooted in and reflective of the paschal mystery which is celebrated within the space. Over the centuries, the architectural forms of Christian churches and their artistic appointments have taken diverse shapes reflective of the structure of the liturgical rites and the theological underpinnings of such rites. However, the church buildings themselves and their appointments have also conditioned both positively and negatively the ways in which the liturgy has been celebrated and the theological understanding of the liturgy. Architectural and artistic styles have reflected both the phenomenon of inculturation and that of tradition. In fact architectural and artistic traditions are simply records of inculturation from the past; as such they provide us with a storehouse of models and resources for proper inculturation today.[4]

Among the most satisfying and successful projects both for Frank Kacmarcik and his clients were the renovation of the Cistercian church at New Melleray Abbey in Peosta, Iowa, and the construction of the new church for the Cistercian community at Mepkin Abbey in South Carolina. They reflect communities that struggled with their identity as Cistercian monks—who they had been in the past, who they were when they considered a building project, and who they hoped to become as a monastic community in the future. Certainly Cistercian monasteries in general made a strenuous effort to renew their lives as monks and nuns in the years immediately following the Second Vatican Council. In renewing and reforming both their liturgy and the spaces in which they worshiped, they carefully attended to the Cistercian architectural tradition.

Cistercian Architectural Tradition

In the middle ages, monastic complexes sometimes became so large that they tended to collapse under their own weight. That seems to be what happened at Cluny in the eleventh and early twelfth century. Consequently there were various monastic reform movements in the late eleventh and the twelfth centuries, chief among them being the Cistercians. The order, named after the first foundation at Citeaux in Burgundy, France, was founded by St. Robert of Molesmes (d. 1111), a former abbot of the Benedictine abbey at Molesmes. In 1098 he founded the monastery at Citeaux to institute a life of poverty, simplicity, and eremetical solitude under the Rule of Benedict. The order flour-

ished, especially under the leadership of St. Bernard, who in 1113, with about thirty companions, applied for admission to Citeaux, became the founder and first abbot of Clairvaux, and died in 1153.[5]

The Cistercian order played an important role in the history of sacred architecture and art. Their buildings, especially the churches, were originally distinguished by their simplicity and absence of ornamentation. This style of architecture formed an integral part of Cistercian spirituality. The relationship between their spirituality and architecture was linked to the way in which they understood their relationship with God and consequently their relationship with the environment they created for themselves. They felt that the life of God was manifested in the material world. Their practice of *lectio divina* resulted in a careful pondering on their structures and their decoration. The mysterious quality of spaces that were open and closed, with clean lines and shadows and shafts of light, all invited the eye to behold the beauty of God, just as the play of sounds in their churches invited the ear to hear the word of God. They were convinced that the human mind and heart should be drawn beyond what it sees and hears. Hence they wanted space in their buildings for the eye to see in a way that inclined its vision to go beyond the sight and the ear to go beyond the word proclaimed. Their spirituality was one that emphasized the importance of place, light, and word, but they wanted all to sustain and foster the contemplative dimensions of their lives.[6]

The Cistercians wanted to be poor with Christ who was poor. As a result they sought to reject anything that might appear to be luxurious, whether in their worship, their clothing, or their food. In architecture, they rejected the construction of bell towers, and the appointment of their places with paintings and sculptures. These commitments were vigorously set out by St. Bernard in his famous *Apologia* addressed to his friend William, the Benedictine abbot of Saint-Thierry. He protested against the splendor of Cluniac churches and their grand size, as well as the decoration and ornamentation of the capitals in both the churches and cloisters. Bernard acknowledged that representations of biblical scenes could be instructive and could edify the faithful, but he wondered what use they could be for spiritual men vowed to a life of poverty.[7]

There is, however, really no such thing as an authentic original Cistercian architectural style. Just as the order evolved, so also

the buildings were the result of complex cultural, organizational, and religious phenomena intermingling with and influencing one another. A great variety of building styles existed, reflecting the context in which they came into being. Furthermore, a description of a distinctive Cistercian architectural style is not to be found in the documents of the general chapters of the order. Although the order was in some sense quite centralized, a certain autonomy was always characteristic of each of the abbeys. St. Bernard has often been taken as speaking with the authority of the whole order; his prestige was great, but his views did not always reflect those of the other abbots. The general chapters sought to keep unity within the order, but unity was not the same as uniformity, since each monastery functioned within a complex web of ecclesiastical and secular politics.[8]

Drawing on the architecture itself, we can conclude that Cistercian art and architecture manifest many different forms of expression. Not surprising, the architectural style at the time of the great expansion of the order was romanesque on its way to becoming Gothic. Hence, this style was adapted by many of the early Cistercian buildings in Burgundy and their daughter houses, but the style of these buildings is not much different from other abbeys in Burgundy. As the order expanded, local styles often fused with the styles that prevailed in the mother abbeys. Furthermore, the development of technology made it possible for the monks to improve their architectural designs as time went on.

The key element lying behind the architectural choices made by abbots and their communities was the silence prescribed by the Rule of Benedict. Life in community was meant to provide a context in which the monks could develop a deep interior life of solitude. The environment in which the monks lived and worked was just as important an instrument for formation as were the books, sermons, and instructions in the community. Although silence is normally a description of an auditory condition, it relates also to the visual realm. There is regularly a near-absence of narrative and color in Cistercian buildings. The decor is achieved by using bands and moldings of various widths, thickness, profile, or material to emphasize the architectural lines. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, figurative sculpture was quite uncommon in Cistercian churches. It was the crucifix in the refectory that had the greatest impact on the monks and nuns. Their imaginations were nourished above all by the images to be found in

scripture and other sources of sacred reading. Perhaps what distinguishes Cistercian buildings most of all is the presence of much light. Sunlight animates the buildings by day, outlining the nooks and crannies, highlighting all the architectural details. It is the silence of the abbeys that draws attention to the visual subtleties, for there are few distractions.

After a long period of more or less faithful building in the romanesque style, the Cistercians adopted the Gothic style and contributed to its expansion all over Europe. Ultimately they succumbed to the trends of their time and built enormous churches decorated with both sculpture and painting.

In addition to their important contribution to architecture, the Cistercians also produced distinguished illuminated manuscripts; the oldest coming from the scriptorium at Citeaux contained ornamented letters and illuminations of a high quality. But about 1150, under Bernard's influence, there was a decree of the order's general chapter, which ruled that only one color should be used for the initial letters of a text. As a result the copyists devoted their care to the quality of the parchment, the outline of the letters, and the arrangement of the text on the page. But soon the chapter's prohibition was forgotten and illuminations reappeared.[9]

Both the Cistercian communities at Peosta in Iowa and Moncks Corner in South Carolina sought to retrieve the best theological and spiritual themes in their tradition and to articulate them in their building projects. They did that with the full support and challenge offered by Frank Kacmarcik as their liturgical / architectural consultant. These monastic communities, following the Rule of Benedict and their Cistercian Constitutions, stand in the biblical tradition, but they have also sought to bring that tradition into dialogue with contemporary culture and technology. They have tried to be responsible for the environment, the place which is their gift, their promise, and their challenge.

Abbey of Our Lady of New Melleray, Peosta, Iowa

In 1973, the Cistercians at the Abbey of Our Lady of New Melleray near Dubuque, Iowa, voted to remodel the north wing of their monastery for the permanent location of their church.[10] The monastery was founded in 1849 by monks from Mount Melleray in Ireland. Following the Civil War, the community engaged a local architect, John Mullany, to design a complex of permanent build-

ings. Mullany had been associated for a time with Augustus Welby Pugin, the distinguished English architect and designer. Mullany's designs reflect Pugin's influence in his preference for pitched roofs and arched windows, and his use of asymmetry and vertical forms. By 1875 the north and east wings were occupied by the monks. Their church was temporarily located on the second floor of the east wing, until it was moved in the 1920s to the second floor of the north wing. Mullany's plans called for a permanent church to be constructed as the south building running parallel to the north wing; however, when construction was resumed on the south wing in the 1950s, the original plans for the church were set aside. When the monks turned their attention to a permanent church in the 1960s, it was suggested that the north wing be razed and a circular church built in its place, but those plans were not accepted by the community. By 1973 they decided instead to remodel the north wing to house a permanent church and hired Willoughby Marshall, Inc., to draw up the original architectural plans.

A second floor was removed from the north and old kitchen wings so as to allow the use of the full height of the north wing for the church and of the old kitchen wing for a chapter house. As a result, an open space of great simplicity was created. Under the direction of Frank Kacmarcik and Theodore Butler, a distinguished architect from Minneapolis, the project was carried through to completion. With the unnecessary partitions and ornamentation stripped away, a space of exceptional beauty emerged as a marvelous shelter capable of revealing God as mysteriously transcendent but also warmly immanent in wood and stone, and above all in the community of monks and their guests gathered for worship. The beams and purloins were sand-blasted so as to appear in natural finish. Douglas fir was used for decking in the roof which arches forty-nine feet above the red-gray tile used as paving throughout the project. The native honey-colored sandstone walls have been left bare; they are pierced by arched windows running along both sides of the building and filled with clear glass so that sunlight plays on the walls and furnishings, thus changing the mood of the church throughout the day. In a sense the space is grand, but it does not dwarf those who gather for worship; it rather generates an atmosphere that is unified, mysterious, and inspiring.

In order to offset the length of the church, the sanctuary at the east end and the guest area at the west end have been elevated

somewhat, thus facilitating visibility and pulling the two ends of the building toward one another. As a monastic church the building is used primarily for the celebration of the liturgy of the hours seven times a day and also for the daily celebration of the Eucharist. The latter has rightly placed the strongest claims in determining the furnishings of the space, but through effective lighting the sanctuary area recedes in prominence during the liturgy of the hours. A gray-black opalescent granite altar centers the space in the sanctuary. On each side of the church is a single row of choir stalls; a tracker-action organ stands at the foot of the choir stalls on the right. Pews at the rear of the church rest on slightly raised tiers, accommodating about eighty guests. The community at the time of renovation insisted on a single wrought-iron grate separating the monks from the guests, which is problematic during the Eucharist, above all during the Communion rite.

Of special interest is the successful handling of the place for the reserved Eucharist. The monks wanted to emphasize the primacy of the eucharistic celebration, but they also wanted the reserved sacrament related to the larger eucharistic space. Hence the reserved sacrament stands in a large tabernacle house of red oak directly behind the presider's chair in the sanctuary. The edifice provides an effective backdrop for the sanctuary area and can accommodate several monks for eucharistic devotion and personal prayer. Apart from the processional cross, the only image in the church is an icon of Our Lady of Vladimir mounted on a wrought iron stand. This is in keeping with the Cistercian tradition which on the one hand has maintained a strong devotion to the Mother of God but on the other hand has been reserved in its attitude toward paintings and sculptures in monastic buildings. The overall effect of the renovation project is powerful; it has been and will continue to be formative of both the monastic community and their guests. It rightly received an honor award from the American Institute of Architects.

Mepkin Abbey Church, Moncks Corner, South Carolina

The new church and other monastic buildings at Mepkin Abbey in South Carolina are eminently successful from both architectural and liturgical points of view. In 1949 a group of Trappist monks came from the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky to bring the monastic life to Mepkin. The property, a splendid old plantation,

belonged to Henry and Clare Booth Luce, who donated it for the foundation of a new monastery. The monks built a provisional church in 1950 and worshiped there for about forty years. In 1989, before the arrival of hurricane Hugo, the community began discussions concerning a renovation of that temporary edifice. The arrival of the hurricane and the destruction it left in its path, however, delayed the project until 1991 when the community, now under the direction of a vibrant young abbot, Francis Kline, took up the process once again.

After interviews with several liturgical/architectural consultants, the community chose Frank Kacmarcik with Theodore Butler as architect. They discussed at length their identity as a community—how they worshiped together, how they prayed as individual monks, how they celebrated the liturgy with retreatants and guests, and how the Eucharist and the liturgy of the hours related to one another in their daily life. During their deliberations they found they were examining the whole of their monastic life: what it had been, how it was currently expressed, and what they hoped for in the future. It was clear that a monastic, theological and liturgical program was uppermost in their minds, rather than a particular style of building. It was also clear that the emerging floor plan of an entirely new church and the relationship of proposed spaces in the church were, in fact, expressing their identity as a Cistercian community and their vision for the future. The centrality of the altar to the entire space; the relation of the choir to the altar; the relation of the retreatants to the monastic community; the placement of casual visitors; the creation of a smaller, more intimate space for personal prayer and eucharistic devotion; the very location of the building itself in the monastic complex—all these factors they discovered spoke of a theology of Cistercian monastic life, their vision of church, and their faith in the risen Lord.

The new church provides both monks and guests with a wonderful experience of both God's transcendence and immanence in the community. One is aware of others, but not too aware. There is a profound sense of beauty in all that is there—in the altar, in the lighting, in the organ, in the wood-work, especially the ceiling, in the holy water font, and above all in the people. The church was dedicated in November, 1993. Since then an impressive bronze statue of Mary and the young Christ Child, designed by the Jewish sculptor, Alexander Tylovich, has been placed at the head of

the choir, near the presider's chair. After winning, along with Theodore Butler, the 1995 American Institute of Architects award for religious architecture for the Mepkin church, Frank went on to guide the community through a large building program from 1997 to 2001. There is a new monastic wing for the elderly and infirm monks, a new refectory for the monks and their guests, and a spacious library and conference center.[11]

Frank Kacmarcik had an extraordinary influence on the positive development of American church architecture and art. He was involved in the design or renovation of over two hundred church buildings in this country. In the Cistercian tradition, his buildings reflect his conviction that the church is not primarily a monument but is rather a place for the celebration of the paschal mystery by the community of God's faithful people. He felt that sacred spaces should be characterized by a certain visual silence, that the space should communicate a discreet sense of absence without the assembly of God's people. He was one of the first to accentuate the importance of a gathering place so that the community might assemble in preparation for the liturgical celebrations. The furnishings, the vessels, the utensils that are used in worship should have a profundity, a *gravitas*, an inner content about them. He was committed to natural art, basic art, fully tactile art. His passion was for beauty, honesty, proportion and truth. His ministry with Cistercian communities confirmed him in that passion.

Notes

1. See Robert Barron, *Bridging the Great Divide: Musings of a Post-liberal, Post-Conservative Catholic*, A Sheed and Ward Book (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004), pp. 11-21, pp. 68-84.

2. See Desiderius Lenz, *The Aesthetic of Beuron and Other Writings* (London: Francis Boutle Publishers, 2002); *Sacred Art: Beuronese Art at Saint John's* (Collegeville: Saint John's, 1998).

3. See RKS, "Brother Frank Kacmarcik Obl.S.B. 1920-2004," *Worship*, 78 (May 2004), pp. 194-99.

4. Peter Jeffery, "A Chant Historian Reads *Liturgiam Authenticam* 3: Language and Culture," *Worship* 78 (May 2002), p. 236.

5. C. H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism: Forms of Religious Life in Western Europe in the Middle Ages* (New York: Longman, 1984), pp. 146-52.

6. See Terryl N. Kinder, *Cistercian Europe: Architecture of Contemplation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); idem, *Architecture of Silence: Cistercian Abbeys of France,* Photography by David Heald (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2000); *Studies in Cistercian Art and Architecture,* ed. Meredith Parsons Lillich; 4 vols. (Kalamazoo, Michigan.: Cistercian Publications, 1980, 1984, 1987, 1993); Anselme Dimier, *Stones Laid before the Lord: Architecture and Monastic Life: A History of Monastic Architecture,* trans. Gilchrist Lavigne (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1999).

7. *Cistercians and Cluniacs: St. Bernard's Apologia to Abbot William,* trans. Michael Casey (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1970); Conrad Rudolph, *The "Things of Greater Importance": Bernard of Clairvaux's Apology and the Medieval Attitude toward Art* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), pp. 287-83.

8. Kinder, *Cistercian Europe,* pp. 374-88.

9. See Janet Backhouse, *The Illuminated Manuscript* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1997).

10. The history of the monastery and church is set out in a booklet: *An Historical Sketch of the Abbey Church* (Dubuque, Iowa: New Melleray Abbey, n.d.); the spirit of the community is described in another booklet: *New Melleray Abbey: Cistercians of the Strict Observance* (Dubuque, Iowa: New Melleray Abbey, n.d.). See also R. Kevin Seasoltz, "L'Abbaye Notre-Dame de New Melleray," *Art d'Église,* XLVII (Janvier-Février-M ars 1979): 1-7; idem, "From the Bauhaus to the House of God's People: Frank Kacmarcik's Contribution to Church Art and Architecture," *U.S. Catholic Historian,* 15 (Winter 1997), pp. 114-15.

11. See Seasoltz, "From the Bauhaus to the House of God's People," 120-21; "A Tribute to Frank Kacmarcik," *Chapter and Verse,* Newsletter from Mepkin Abbey (Fall 2004).