

How Lovely is Your Dwelling Place!

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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 to the Redemptorists experience of built spaces.

Introduction

Quite recently, a non-catholic organization the Iglesia Ni Cristo (INC) built a huge structure said to be the world's largest indoor arena. The question has been asked: Does such 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 P1-billion El Shaddai House of Prayer was inaugurated on Bro. Mike Velarde's 70th birthday. No less than President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo inaugurated the billion peso church. Bishop Angel Lagdameo, the main celebrant of the concelebrated Mass for the inauguration, was quoted saying that the structure was so big that he needed six eyes to address the crowd. Fr. Fernand Suarez, a Catholic priest, also made an attempt of constructing a billion peso shrine. He conceived to construct a P1 billion 'mega-shrine' to Mother Mary in Alfonso, Cavite. In these instances, questions were similarly raised on the motives ~~on~~ 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.

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 calling such initiatives as “uglification.” Even the local heritage advocates have questioned the conservation approach employed by local church authorities. Many become emotional and oftentimes, the project ~~it~~ has even become a source of conflicts. Internationally, the demolition, desecration, destruction of tombs, statues, mosques, and shrines of importance to Christians, Muslims, and Jews by the ISIS militants 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.

With these events that are happening locally and around the world, it has become an 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.”