



Anna M. Wierzbicka\*

## *Modern church architecture. Ethical and non-ethical manner of creation*

[...] we are experiencing not only the crisis of sacral art but the crisis of art in general in the dimension not known before. The crisis of art is a symptom of the crisis of the society – the society which, at the time when the world has been totally conquered by the material element, is suffering from a specific blindness relating to the questions that go beyond materiality [...].

Joseph Ratzinger [15, pp. 118–119]

In this article we attempt to answer the following questions: where is the limit of free creation in the modern sacral architecture? Should sacral architecture be created in accordance with an accepted canon or rule of designing? What should modern architects follow? Should they draw inspiration from the past or rather look for new design solutions?

The modern sacral architecture is a consequence of changes introduced by the Second Vatican Council, which emphasized a community character of the liturgy by recommending one centrally situated altar in the church as a sign of Christ. The second significant change which influenced formation of the sacral space was the fact that the presbyter faced the congregation so that people gathered in the church could participate in the rite in a more conscious way. General principles of designing a catholic church are defined by the Roman Missal: *The People of God gathered for the Holy Mass have their organic and hierarchical structure which is expressed by various functions and activities in the particular parts of the celebration. Therefore, the general plan of the church should express a specific image of the gathered people and enable maintaining the proper order so that each participant could perform his particular functions. Although all this is supposed to express a hierarchical structure and a variety of functions, it is also to contribute to the creation of an internal and organic unity through which the unity of all God's people is reflected. The nature and beauty of the place as well as the church interior ought to facilitate piety and show the holiness of the mysteries which are held* [12, introduction, chapter V 294].

The following declaration was of great significance for the designers of sacral buildings: [...] *The Church does not treat any style as its own, but according to the national character and conditions as well as needs of various rites allows for artistic forms of each époque creating in the course of time a treasury of art which must be preserved with due care* [KL 123]. This provision opened up numerous possibilities of a free manner of creation. What is significant in sacral structures [...] *also new forms of art should be recognized by the Church in accordance with the contemporary needs of people* [KDK 63]. However, we must notice that the liturgical renewal was started already in the 1930s, before the Second Vatican Council and one of its forerunners was Romano Guardini – a German liturgist of Italian origin. In his book *Holy Signs* [3] he emphasized the significance of the common liturgical space. The books written by Guardini, who was a friend of such architects as Rudolf Schwarz, Dominikus Böhm and Otto Bartning, resulted in a new understanding of the church space and they gave expression to the sacral architecture of these times [quoted from: 11, p. 29].

The new liturgical trend in Germany as well as the emerging concept of the modern architecture were the harbinger of changes which, however, took place fully only after the Second Vatican Council. In 1969 Pope Paul VI authorized the detailed regulation *About the Arrangement and Equipment of the Church for Holding the Eucharist* [12, introduction]. The liturgists and architects started then to look for ways of renewal which was done by coming back to the fundamental roots with the arbitral meaning. It is in this period that we can notice the bloom of sacral structures with a new character. K. Kucza-Kuczyński, a highly esteemed designer and

\* Faculty of Architecture, Warsaw University of Technology.

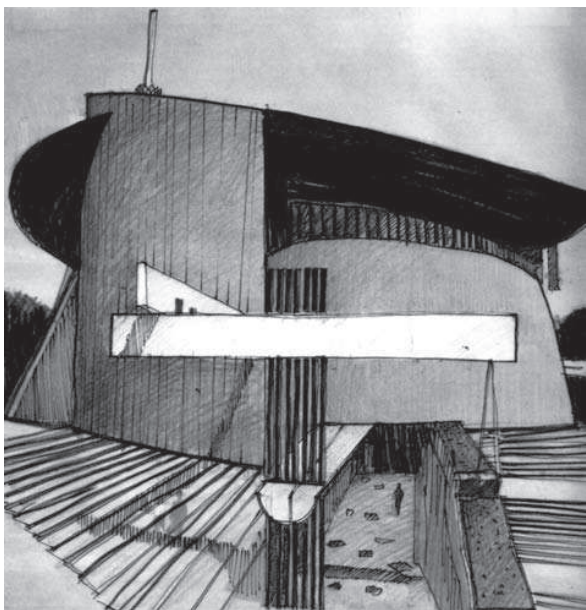


Fig. 1. Blessed Virgin Mary Queen of Poland Church, known as the Lord's Ark in Krakow – Nowa Huta, architect Wojciech Pietrzak, sculptures by Bronisław Chromy, 1968–1978 (drawing by A. M. Wierzbicka)

Il. 1. Kościół pw. Najświętszej Marii Panny Królowej Polski – Arka Pana w Krakowie-Nowej Hucie, arch. Wojciech Pietrzak, rzeźby Bronisław Chromy, realizacja 1968–1978 (rys. A.M. Wierzbicka)

critic of sacral architecture noticed: *In Germany between 1945 and 1980 more churches were built than during the last 400 years.* In Poland this phenomenon took place on a large scale since the beginning of the 1970s when, as we can read, *so many churches were built as nowhere else in Europe [...]* [quoted from: 7, pp. 284 and 6, p. 60].

What can possibly be the reason, however, that among so many realizations we have such numerous unsuccessful sacral structures? One of the reasons may be the fact that [...] *general awareness of models was relatively low* [9]. Some designers directly derived inspiration from the western structures transferring them onto the Polish ground. A good example of this is Blessed Virgin Mary Queen of Poland Church in Nowa Huta (Fig. 1) which was modelled upon the Ronchamp Chapel by Le Corbusier built in 1957. However, we can notice many differences pertaining to the scale of buildings, employed materials or interior solutions. Le Corbusier's Chapel has an intimate character, whereas its form as the designer emphasised himself [...] *is a consequence of immersion into problems for which no utility purposes were to be fulfilled* [quoted from: 8, p. 160]. The Nowa Huta Church was supposed to serve a numerous congregation (4 000 people) and perhaps that was the reason why the interior is not intimate in character which also results from too intense lighting of the building. However, the value of this structure is indisputable as it appears as one of the few examples of the modern Polish sacral architecture also in foreign publications where it was given the name of 'The Lord's Ark'. K. Kucza-Kuczyński in his book *New Churches in Poland* writes: *Regardless of liturgical disputability, the*

*Nowa Huta Ark is already a part of the history of new Polish churches. It constitutes a potent symbol of the idea of people's integration with their church* [9].

Another significant criterion of assessing the value of the contemporary Polish sacral structures is the following Council's recommendation: [...] *the bishop when (...) caring about the real church art should pay particular attention to noble beauty rather than splendour itself* [KL 123]. However, there are numerous unsuccessful structures in which the richness of form dominates over the assumption of the sacral, spiritual nature of the building. Nevertheless, to a large extent the responsibility for this situation lies with the investor. As Kucza-Kuczyński writes: [...] *Of course, the responsibility of the sacral building designer towards the ordering patron as regards outlook is more difficult. The situation in Poland is particularly difficult. After a quantitative success of building thousands of churches in the years 1975–1990 without their qualitative assessment, without support in how to fully understand the Council's recommendations and with unprofessional seminary preparation in the scope of sacral art and architecture, the architect receives an order which is dramatically different from the modern post-Council vision of the meagre sacral space* [10, p. 103–104]. One of the numerous examples of an excessively rich form is the Warsaw Church of the Barnabites (Fig. 2) designed by G. Ratajski, a designer of several other churches in Nowe Tychy. In this design we can see references to Blessed Karolina Kózkówna Church which was built in the years 1992–2000 and designed by the same architect. This church in Nowe Tychy was planned as [...] *a huge structure built of red brick based on the plan of the Greek cross and surmounted by a centrally situated cupola. It constitutes a very strong dominant characteristic, seen against the background of bright simple blocks* [17, p. 36]. Originally, the design had rich details,



Fig. 2. St. Anthony Mary Zaccaria Church of the Barnabites in Warsaw, architect Grzegorz Ratajski, realization 2003–2007 (drawing by A.M. Wierzbicka)

Il. 2. Kościół Ojców Barnabitów pw. św. Marii Zaccarii w Warszawie, arch. Grzegorz Ratajski, realizacja 2003–2007 (rys. A.M. Wierzbicka)

however [...] *richness of forms and too literal reference to the old styles met with objections on the part of the Commission on Architecture and Sacral Affairs* [in: 7, p. 36]. In spite of this, as J. Sowińska declares: *Even now, after the style and form of the church were somehow purified and simplified, it is still controversial and surprising as it balances on the border of eclectic creativity* [17, p. 35]. The same can be applied to the Warsaw realization of G. Ratajski which – especially in its interior part – contains all the possible components of historical styles: Roman arches, oval Baroque openings or Gothicizing stuccos on the cupola vault. This design was chosen by the parish priest of the local church from among the competition works which were not awarded any prizes. This contest, where the jury comprised architects and in which a project by A. Kiciński won the main prize, was annulled. It must be emphasized, however, that the unrealized winning project was a forerunner of new solutions with concurrent acceptance of the traditional architectural forms.

Similar objections as with A. Kiciński's realization can be raised in the case of the basilica in Licheń with its kitschy dome as well as Blessed Władysław z Gielniowa Church in Warsaw district of Ursynów. The Basilica in Licheń designed by A. Bielecka and built within ten years still stirs up controversy and objections from intellectuals. Due to lack of proportions, the symbolism of this church seems unclear while eclecticism and richness of details are not conducive to transcendental experiences. According to M. Omilanowska, a historian of art: *For a historian of art who looks at the Licheń Basilica it is clear that this structure breaks basically all canons of architectural designing starting from Vitruvius, in spite of the undisputed fact that it obviously attempts to become part of the diverse tradition of the architectural order* [14, p. 34].

Another problem that appears during the process of creation of an architectural sacral structure is the author's desire to introduce and develop his own concepts which do not respect the tradition or symbolism of Christian churches. The architect's personal interpretation of them often differs so much from the traditional allegorical or symbolic meanings that without any former indications it is difficult to understand properly a given structure. An example of a modern Polish sacral realisation where the designers introduced their own symbolism is Mother of God Queen of Peace Church in Wrocław-Popowice designed by W. Hryniewicz, W. Jarzabek and J. Matkowski, constructed in the years 1982–1996. W. Jarzabek describes this design as follows: *The shape of the tower and richly segmented roof symbolising positioned for prayer hands from which the church Patron's soft robe falls down constitute the main idea. Her protective robe hemmed in the shape of ramparts provides shelter for the faithful from numerous sufferings of the daily life.* [5, p. 15]. However, this allegorical interpretation arouses serious doubts as to the question whether the structure full of geometrical expression which is supposed to symbolise Mary's hands positioned for prayer can be properly understood by the congregation. Nevertheless, P. Kar-

kowski believes that the far-reaching interpretation explains the geometrical expression and in his opinion it must be admitted that [...] *in the case of the Popowice church, the designers achieved their goal, i.e. the building has visible features of a sacral structure and it is beyond all doubt that this is a church.* [...] *The Wrocław structure constitutes an effect of reduced aesthetical thinking which is expressed through purposefulness, construction and poetry* [15].

Another allegorical depiction which is supposed to symbolize the Holy Spirit was expressed in the realisation of the Holy Spirit Church designed by T. Zipser, W. Wawrzyniak and J. Wojnarowicz erected also in Wrocław in the years 1973–1981. In the Christian art, the Holy Spirit is represented by a dove while the Church Fathers in their writings repeatedly point to a mythical union between a dove and the Betrothed one – Church of the New and Old Testament, symbolizing a soul united with God [2, p. 229]. One of the co-authors of the design, W. Wawrzyniak, talks about the decisions that were made: *When working on the design, apart from strong emotions connected with the quest for artistic solutions, we were aware of the historical and national tradition. We also had our personal memories of journeys and experiences connected with architecture, especially the 'old' architecture – one that contains magically beaming beauty* [19, p. 169]. It needs to be emphasized that the form of the structure does not refer to old spatial solutions, but at the same time it does not reject the tradition. Brick as a building material and frontal stained glass windows with ogival finishing bring to mind many remarkable Gothic temples. The frontal stained glass window is complemented by a high pavilion roof topped with a cross.

During a critical analysis of the contemporary Polish sacral realizations we cannot focus solely on the exterior form of the structure. The essence of a Christian temple is its interior because it is there that the holy liturgy takes place. As Father Henryk Nadrowski emphasized: *The entire space of the church – exterior and interior – is supposed to shape the community, facilitate the transfer of truths of faith, create the atmosphere of a dialogue with God, both for the particular participant as well as, in a specific manner, for the whole liturgical community. Thanks to the church interior, new People of God are formed* [13, p. 140]. In some cases, however, the process of shaping this space through a search for new functional system solutions raises serious doubts. A significant problem connected with the recent Polish sacral structures constitutes, inter alia, their scale. The sacral structures which are built within the territories of anonymous housing estates of thousands of residents are characterized by enormous spaces that can house numerous congregations. This brings about some difficulties for the people in identifying with their parish and forming an integrated community. Participation in the liturgy requires a close contact with the altar, both for the presbyter and also for the congregation gathered in front of the altar.

Analysing the Second Vatican Council recommendations as to the liturgy, Maurizio Bergamo reached the conclusion that the best arrangement for holding the lit-



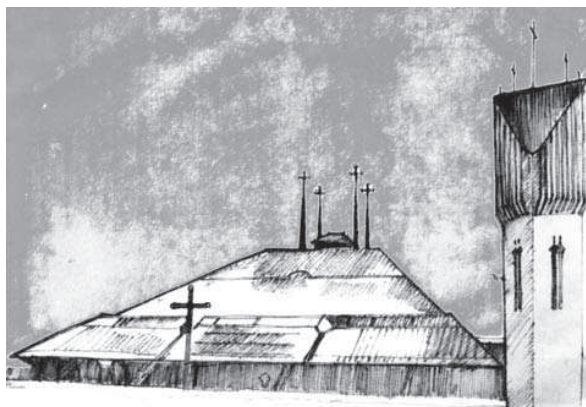


Fig. 3. St. Andrew Bobola Sanctuary in Warsaw, architects:  
H. Madejowska, B. Madejowski, 1979–1988  
(drawing by A. M. Wierzbicka)

Il. 3. Sanktuarium św. Andrzeja Boboli w Warszawie, architekci:  
H. Madejowska, B. Madejowski, realizacja 1979–1988  
(rys. A. M. Wierzbicka)

urgy of the Eucharist and also for the liturgy of baptism is the arrangement with the centrally situated altar in the distance not exceeding 2 to 2.5 metres from the gathered people. According to the Council recommendations, the particular components of the interior ought to symbolize the sacraments introducing into the complete Christian life [1, p. 65]. Accordingly, at the entrance to the church there should be a baptismal font symbolizing the sacrament of the introduction into the Christian community and then the Eucharistic altar: the major liturgical symbol and the central place of preaching the word. This sequence, thanks to its hierarchy and emphasizing symbolic aspects, is supposed to catechize the congregation for whom the signs in the church personify the real presence of God. But nowadays, big churches rarely enhance a sense of a religious community because of their scale as well as their form. The fact of elevating the altar does not emphasise a symbolic character, but rather maintains distance between the participants of the liturgy and the central point of the rite. A good example here is St. Andrzej Bobola Sanctuary in Warsaw (Fig. 3) where – as a result of an architectural solution – people are situated in rows parallel to the altar, which does not facilitate their contact with the presbyter of the liturgy. The only people who have a free eye contact with the altar are the altar boys and a concelebrant due to the en suite arrangement of pews behind the presbytery space.

On the other hand, a successful solution of a large interior can be exemplified in the Holy Spirit Church in Nowe Tychy. The main space of the church was planned on the rectangular projection where the altar was elevated symmetrically in relation to the rectangular sides. The congregation is gathered on its three sides, thanks to which they all have almost the same access to the altar. The entire structure was covered by a pyramid roof, while the light is directed centrally onto the altar. As K. Kucza-Kuczyński

noticed: *Stylistic autonomy and an escape from dry modernism combined with an attempt to overcome ornamental postmodernism contributes to an overall effect of an original work* [9, p. 18].

Coming back to small spaces of prayer and sparse gatherings signifies coming back to the original community meaning of the act of gathering the congregation. In order to remain an understandable sign, a church – in which a Christian prayer, time and space undergo mutual permeation [4, p. 145] – has to combine many symbolic aspects. Therefore, the symbolic expression of a sacral structure involves not only the position of the people towards the altar, but also symbolism of lighting, choice of materials and the general atmosphere of the whole interior. The Holy Mass is not only the question of a spatial aspect, but it takes place in a particular time. According to J. Ratzinger: the annual Christian liturgy is aimed at [...] *including us in Christ by internalising one by one all the moments of His life on the Earth up to His death and resurrection* [15, p. 86].

In conclusion, it must be stressed that it is difficult to impose one particular form of a Christian temple – such actions in the spirit of the Council freedom must be rather recognised as incorrect. As R. Schwarz points out rightly, [...] *we cannot come back to the architecture of cathedrals of early Christianity and exactly copy the models of that time. Indeed, this was a mistake of historicism. And our new technologies would let us down. Of course, it would be possible to reconstruct the Roman or Gothic architecture fully. But would it be the truth? For us architecture is something else. [...] Architecture must fully reflect the state and significance of our times. Architecture of a temple may originate from sacrum only. Sacral architecture does not originate from the world, but from faith which is the response to our times. [...] Sacral matter, on the basis of which the church architecture is to be formed, ought to be a living response to the needs of our generations* [16, p. 36]. It is also difficult to assess the ethical value of the realized structures – they do not result from bad faith, but rather from lack of technical skills or simply lack of knowledge about the symbolism of a Christian temple. According to the principles of the architect's profession: *An architect performs the professional tasks entrusted to him using the best of his will, knowledge and skills*<sup>1</sup>, which means that architects while doing their designing work ought to broaden their knowledge and skills. As mentioned above, it is often investors who are to blame for the unsuccessful sacral structures because, contrary to the Council recommendations, they introduce their own visions and aspirations which ignore suggestions of the professionals. With sacral structures, the most significant element of the building is not connected with its form, material or scale, but first of all with its symbolism. *Holy spaces which influence the spectator in a correct way always have a number of meanings of spatial symbols, both in the urban scale and in the architectural*

<sup>1</sup> Art. 12, Rules of ethics are in effect as of 1 January 2003, Resolution No. 19, official website of the SARP.

scale. [...] The exterior of the structure with its visible elements influence the recipient in the city tissue as well as in the landscape. On the other hand, the particular components of the interior enable us to experience the full extent of the liturgy. Employment of the holy space symbols in a hierarchic way sublimes sacrum experiences in the architectural space, in the churches where the designers man-

aged the space according to the Christocentrism principle. Symbolic communication results from the universal state of man. Contemporary man, despite many social, cultural and historical changes, has not changed as regards his homo symbolicus nature. The original necessity of designing sacrum space remained invariable [20].

Translated by B. Setkowicz

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### Współczesna architektura sakralna – etyczna i nieetyczna droga kreacji

Artykuł jest próbą odpowiedzi na pytanie: Jaka jest granica dowolnej kreacji we współczesnej architekturze sakralnej? Czy architektura sakralna nie powinna być tworzona zgodnie z jakimś kanonem czy regułą projektowania? Po reformie Soboru Watykańskiego II do dziś trwają poszukiwania języka stylu, formy obiektów sakralnych w świątyniach katolickich. Modernizm, który był w czasach Vaticanum II stylem wiodą-

cym, nie dał pełnej odpowiedzi na pytanie: Czym jest sacrum w architekturze i co stanowi jego podstawowy język? Poszukiwania współczesnych architektów często posługujących się indywidualistyczną drogą kreacji pozostawiają wiele wątpliwości etycznych. Czy istnieje granica indywidualnej interpretacji przestrzeni sacrum i czym jest etyka podczas projektowania architektury sakralnej?

**Key words:** ethical limits of creation, church architecture

**Słowa kluczowe:** etyczne granice kreacji, architektura sakralna



Architect – a fragment of woodcut from Philibert de L'Orme's treatise; Oeuvres de Philibert de l'Orme, [ed.] Regnault Chaudiere, Paris, 1626, illustration after p. 51, (open library resource: <http://ia600209.us.archive.org/23/items/architectureph00lorm/architectureph00lorm.pdf>)

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