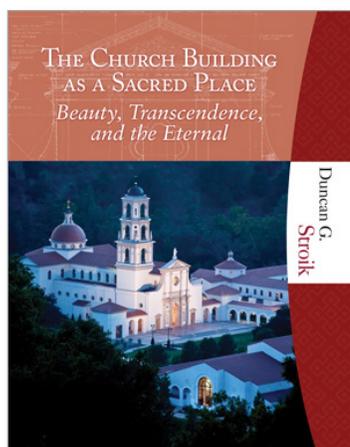


# BOOKS FOR THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

BY TIMOTHY P. O'MALLEY, PH.D.



**The Church Building as  
Sacred Place: Beauty,  
Transcendence, and the  
Eternal**  
by Duncan G. Stroik

Chicago  
Hillenbrand Books, 2012  
\$75.00.

Dear pastor, it's time for your parish either to build a new church or renovate an existing structure. You assemble a finance

committee, focusing on the capital campaign necessary for the building project. You begin to explore which architect might fit with this particular project. You hold listening sessions in which parishioners express their deepest desires for what the new building will include. You may even hire a liturgical consultant to assist in shaping the liturgical space, a kind of liturgical equivalent to the interior designer. In the midst of the busyness, the process of planning, the paralyzing fear that you'll never actually complete the project, you may forget to ask a preliminary question: why do we build churches?

To such pastors and building committees alike, I'd like to recommend a first step: read Duncan Stroik's *The Church Building*

*as Sacred Place: Beauty, Transcendence, and the Eternal*. Stroik, a professor of architecture at the University of Notre Dame who has designed churches throughout the United States, presents in a single volume a series of clear, well-written, theologically and architecturally sound essays on the sacramental function of the church building in the modern world. According to Stroik, churches are not simply functional buildings for the performance of liturgical rites but instead "...portray through bricks, mortar, and iconography the mystery of salvation. Even the exterior of the church should remind us of Holy Communion, of Baptism, of Marriage" (3). The work consists of four parts treating theological, architectural, and liturgical principles for church design (Part 1), church

architecture today (Part 2), the problems with modernism and church design (Part 3), and the hope for a renaissance in liturgical architecture (Part 4). The essays themselves move through a wide variety of literature, including architectural philosophy related to the new urbanism, Church documents on the liturgy and architecture, and the writings of theologians such as Blessed John Henry Newman and Benedict XVI.

Of course, this theological understanding of the church building as inscribing one in a liturgical and sacramental cosmology is often absent from considerations of liturgical architecture. Stroik's essays re-orient the imagination of the reader toward a deeper understanding of the grammar of liturgical spaces. In "The Church as a Sacred Place", he contemplates the tradition of liturgical architecture in order to develop a definition of what constitutes a church building: a church is liturgical, sacramental, a home for liturgical elements, devotional, iconographic and symbolic, and sacred (12-13). This historical, theologically centered, and liturgically sound foundation enables Stroik's essays to transcend ideology and move toward a hope-filled contemplation of the function of churches in the

Catholic imagination. The second essay of the volume, for example, performs a thought exercise whereby one begins to imagine the church building not as a list of "items" that one would desire in a worship space but instead through attention to the altar as the heart of the church building. Stroik writes at the conclusion of this essay,

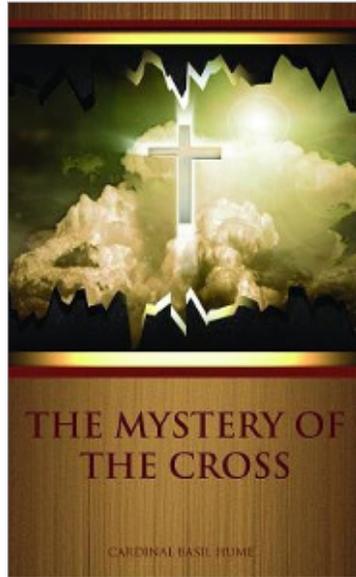
the understanding of the meaning of the altar will cause us to make it the most beautiful object possible. The design of other sacramental and devotional elements, and of the Church building itself, should follow. The centrality of the Eucharist as commemoration, sacrifice, and communion requires our churches to be elaborate in meaning as well as in architecture. If we design our churches to center on, and grow out from, Christ present in the most holy altar and tabernacle, this will help us to regain the beautiful and the sacred in the liturgy and, ultimately, in our lives (31).

The goal is not to become a liturgical aesthete but instead to incarnate the beauty of divine life into a space, which opens up the imagination of the worshiper to self-gift. Indeed, throughout the volume, Stroik is careful to

any avoid charges of liturgical elitism, insisting that beauty is not reserved for the rich (in art museums) but should be offered for the cultivation of all—rich and poor alike.

The reader will have much to discover in the volume. The iconic images on each page of the text, both ancient and contemporary, offer a pedagogical formation into sound liturgical architecture. The section of the text on modernism unfolds the various myths of modernist architectural theory, deconstructing the iconoclasm of such a philosophy through an argument that Catholicism is a bodily inscribed tradition, "and the architecture we have been given is a material symbol of that faith, a physical witness of the devotion of our forebears" (98). Church buildings are rescued from the heresy of liturgical functionalism, allowing them to become contemplative spaces for "...all parts of the life of the Body of Christ: the liturgy, the sacraments, the Word of God, good sermons, service to the needy and unloved, education and comfort" (52). Likewise, Stroik never departs from his insights as a practitioner of architecture, one who knows the difficulty of contending with limited budgets.

Therefore, Stroik's essays are not simply a how-to guide for those parishes seeking to renovate or build a new parish church. Instead, the text is an argument for the evangelical function of church buildings, spaces that form the sacramental imaginations of Catholics through the materiality of vertical architecture, stained glass windows, a prominently positioned altar, and an exterior (that includes a piazza) that draws the entire world into the salvific narrative of Christian faith. Though an investment, I recommend this text for any parish considering a renovation or building project, as well as those seeking a deeper understanding of the formative power of liturgical prayer.



### **The Mystery of the Cross by Cardinal Basil Hume**

New York  
Paulist Press, 2012  
\$9.95

In every undergraduate course I teach at the university, whether the subject is biblical literature or sacramental theology, the topic of suffering arises with frequency. To address suffering in a sensitive manner, as any pastoral minister knows, is an extraordinarily difficult act. The question of suffering is never merely philosophical, a hypothesis regarding theodicy. Rather, it is existential, self-implicating. Why did my mother die from cancer? Why did divorce rip apart my family? Why did this natural disaster strike my town?

The mystery of suffering is at the heart of Cardinal Basil Hume's book of meditations, *The Mystery of the Cross*. Cardinal Hume (d. 1999), the former Archbishop of Westminster, does not approach suffering as an intellectual problem to be solved, a topic for further theological debate. Instead, embodying a monastic approach to theology, Hume treats suffering as a mystery of human life to be contemplated in light of Christ's self-gift upon the Cross: "The experience of suffering and, very important, the experience of failure brings us face to face with mystery. They are stern but effective teachers of the ways of God, unless, of course, they lead to bitterness and rancor" (3). Though Hume acknowledges the pedagogical function of suffering in the Christian life, he does not deny the difficulty of submitting oneself to this pedagogy. The anguish of a mother who must watch her child die; the tragic violence of national strife which interrupts our sense of security; the power of the sea so capable of destroying a town; the recognition of our own death—all of these aspects of suffering are examined, and slowly the reader is taken up into a spirit of prayer, placing oneself before the mystery of the Cross.

And this pedagogy of suffering, as it occurs in the first part of the text, relies upon the Cross as a contemplative icon that does not “solve” the problem of suffering but illumines it in love. Hume writes, “As far as I know, no one has adequately and conclusively explained the existence of evil in our world. I do know, however, that the answer is to be found in looking at the crucified Christ. *There* is the book I must study to find the answer. There I shall find the Word made flesh, God who became man, suffering and dying on a cross” (27). The existential tension that suffering produces in the human heart is not passed over but instead transfigured through the beauty of the Cross.

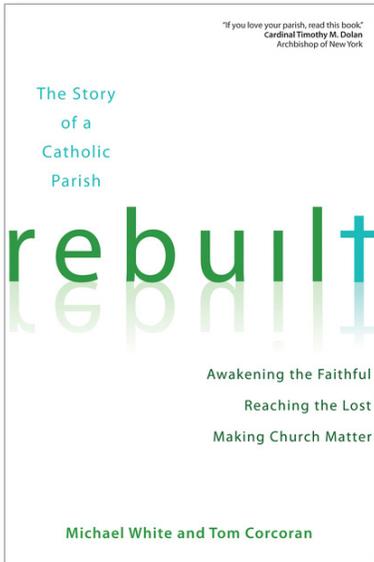
This pedagogy of the Cross continues in the second part, as Hume turns to the human response to such suffering. That is, if the problem of suffering cannot be answered in a philosophical or theological textbook, then what are we to do? The response, again explored in a contemplative manner, is to take up a disposition of peace that enables the Christian to perceive the salutary nature of suffering in the Christian life. As Hume writes, regarding dryness in prayer, “The garden of Gethsemane is quite often—perhaps even most often—the

place where we meet God; more rarely do we meet God on the mountain called Tabor where the Transfiguration of Jesus occurred. Darkness and coldness are part of the spiritual life ... Love is tested by absence, and desire for God is awakened as much in periods of trial as in moments of spiritual ease” (50). The implicit assumption of this second part of the text is that the Christian life requires a formation into prayer, into virtue, into meditational techniques that capacitate the Christian to discern the very light of God that shines into the darkness of the soul afflicted by the Cross.

Finally, Hume turns his contemplative gaze toward the liturgical year. The last part of the series of meditations gazes anew upon human life through the mysteries of Christmas, of the Transfiguration, of Lent, and of the Holy Triduum. These “mysteries” are never only a historical account of what Christ once did, but as we reflect upon them, they became incarnate through the interior renewal we experience. Hume’s reflection on Easter comments, “Easter does not take suffering away from us, nor does it save us from physical death. But suffering and death are now different, because Christ suffered and died. Indeed, before Christ rose from the

dead there was only despair at the centre of pain. Now, and because of Christ, there is hope” (117).

*The Mystery of the Cross* consists of such meditations, inviting us to let Christ the Great Physician heal the wounds of our lives. I especially recommend this text to all those preparing for pastoral ministry, as well as those undergoing the unavoidable suffering that constitutes life in a fallen world. Reading along with Hume, the reader will find himself or herself entering more deeply into the pedagogy of the Cross, the only way to deal fruitfully with the mystery of suffering.



**Rebuilt—The Story of a Catholic Parish: Awakening the Faithful, Reaching the Lost, Making Church Matter by Michael White and Tom Corcoran**

Notre Dame, IN  
Ave Maria Press, 2013  
\$16.95

Catholics are generally suspicious of what takes place at mega-churches throughout the country. While recognizing that many former Catholics now populate such churches, there is a suspicion that evangelical mega-churches have traded in a commitment to the truth of Christian faith for a popularizing approach that reduces the Gospel to coffee bars and relatable, albeit palatable, preaching. Fr. Michael White and Tom Corcoran upset this assumption among Catholics in their recent book, an attempt to

learn from the strategies of mega-churches in order to revitalize Catholic parish life.

In Part I of the book, Fr. White and Corcoran provide an astute analysis of the failures of contemporary parish life through an analysis of the revitalization of their own parish in north Baltimore (Nativity). Even populated parishes operate out of mindset emphasizing the proliferation of programs and events, which cater to various factions of the parish—resulting in a reduction of parish life to a form of consumerism. Such an approach led to lay members of the parish expecting the parish staff to do a remarkable amount of work for them, while also maintaining the assumption that not much was required of them as consumer. Further, this consumer mentality, endemic in American religious life (a fact learned from the evangelical churches) resulted in a church comfortable for (what Fr. White and Corcoran call) “churchpeople” (42-43). On the other hand, church as consumption ignored the lost: “Nativity was never even in the business of reaching the lost. Nativity was irrelevant to the lost. And we *wanted* to be that way. We were proud that we were that way. In fact, we blamed the lost for being lost. It was somehow their

fault. They deserved to be lost because they weren’t interested in doing church our way” (46).

Part II shifts toward offering a medicine for the illness that plagues American parishes. At the heart of Christianity is, according to Fr. White and Corcoran, discipleship. A parish interested in pursuing an evangelizing strategy (rather than a consumer approach) will need to first define the geographic area that one serves, understand the lost within that area, and design an effective invitation strategy (Chapter 5). In addition, the parish will require a vast shift in mentality—no longer focusing solely on mass attendance numbers, the number of liturgies offered, doctrinal education, or “building pretty churches” (78-81).

Part III of *Rebuilt* is indeed a gift for the Church’s strategy of evangelization. Fr. White and Corcoran provide concrete strategies for renewing the life of the parish through making the work of evangelization central to the parish’s mission. Parishes need to put an incredible amount of emphasis on Sunday(s), fostering hospitality through various teams in the church, insisting on beautiful, worshipful music (in the case of Nativity, this is often praise and worship, although they include chant as

well). Slowly, the text unfolds strategies for renewing parish life through energizing, solid, youth catechesis and involvement in parish life, a commitment to persuasive, intelligent preaching, involvement of ministry teams, stewardship and service, and more. The style of the text is easy to read, moving from narrative, to interview, to suggestions for a parish community to enact its own renewal.”

At the end of *Rebuilt*, the pastoral team of a parish would come away with a renewed vision of what might constitute parish life. Catholic parishes seek to be vital, not because it is important to have gaudy numbers or it is necessary to sustain a robust school but because the Church “is the Body that Christ forms as his own and charges to transform society through the introduction of the kingdom of heaven on earth. It is quite simply the hope of the world” (261). Parish ministers mediate this hope to the world. At the same time, through a reading of this text, a parish staff would be capacitated to employ various strategies for re-evangelizing their own parish. I recommend it for all parish staffs committed to the New Evangelization.