

The Arrangements of Western Medieval and Byzantine Churches Compared and their Relevance to Liturgy Today

By Christopher Rakowski

INTRODUCTION

This article has been adapted from the opening sections of my work *Principles of Choir Ceremonial* shortly to be completed. In it I hope to demonstrate the close similarities which exist between the ordering of a large Western medieval church and the arrangement which is still to be found in a church of the Byzantine rite today. The architecture and arrangement of any church are dictated primarily by the liturgical rites which take place within it. By examining this ordering of the various parts and furnishings of a church building we can often gain an insight into the meaning and significance of those same liturgical ceremonies. Recently I have been increasingly struck by the remarkably close parallels which one can find by comparing the liturgical ceremonies of the Byzantine rite as still performed today and the Roman rite as it should be celebrated according to the letter and spirit of its own rubrics. The parallels become all the clearer when one studies Western liturgy in its medieval form. Today, a Western Christian attending a liturgical function for the first time in a Byzantine church will probably experience a very different ethos to that which he is used to in a Western rite church and this irrespective of whether the Western liturgy is performed according to its pre- or post-Vatican II recensions.

Yet this has not always been so. The great tragedy in the West is that since at least the time of the Renaissance increasing liturgical minimalism (what I choose to call the "Low Mass mentality") and the demise of the public Divine Office have completely obscured the nature of liturgy as a corporate act and duty. Liturgy is not meant merely to be attended out of a sense of obligation or even of piety but to be lived. This concept of living the Liturgy still holds good in the Churches of the East where the liturgy is the common prayer of the people and provides all their spiritual needs. It is my hope that by drawing attention to the common values of Roman and Byzantine liturgy one can contribute not only to a liturgical revival in the West but to a greater appreciation by both Western and Eastern Christians of the essential Unity of their Faith as expressed in the liturgy. An examination of the infrastructure of the liturgy - the ordering of a church - seems to me as good a place as any at which to begin such an undertaking.

For those readers who are unfamiliar with architectural terms a brief explanation of the more common ones may be useful. Churches in both East and West are frequently designed with a plan which resembles a cross in shape. The arms of this cross are known as the transepts and the area where they intersect with the main limb the crossing. By a very ancient tradition the Altar of the church is usually placed at the east end of the building within the eastern arm of the cross. The western arm is known as the nave (from the Latin *Navis* meaning a ship) and is occupied by the laity during church functions. In the East the plan of a church usually resembles that of a Greek cross with the arms all equal length.

In the West the nave is generally longer than the other arms so that the plan resembles a Latin cross in shape. I have used the spelling " quire " to indicate that portion of the building which is occupied by the " choir " made up of clergy and singers. This distinction is useful to avoid ambiguity. The quire is normally situated within the eastern arm before the Altar though in some medieval churches (particularly monastic ones) the quire occupied the crossing or even extended into the (architectural) nave.

OUR MEDIEVAL CHURCHES AND THEIR SCREENS

If we compare the arrangement of large Western medieval church with that of an Orthodox church of the Byzantine rite a number of quite striking similarities become apparent. It transpires that the quire of a medieval church corresponds closely in layout and function to the nave of an Orthodox church, while the medieval nave really represents little more than a vastly enlarged Orthodox narthex. In many of our medieval cathedrals the chancel (usually that limb of a cruciform church building which lies east of the crossing and transepts) is an enclosed and self-contained unit, often with its own set of (eastern) transepts, and completely closed off from the nave by a heavy stone quire-screen or pulpitum.

In the Middle Ages the pulpitum would have been supplemented by another screen -the rood screen- one bay further to the west. This had a dual purpose. It supported the Rood (the large crucifix, with accompanying images of the Virgin and St John, which dominated the nave) and it also formed a reredos to the Nave Altar. It would have been equipped with two doors, one on either side of the Nave Altar, which in the Sarum rite, were used by the Deacon to pass around the Altar while censing it. Where the High Altar in the chancel was also given a reredos, this too would have had two doors as one still sees today at Westminster Abbey and Winchester Cathedral.

The pulpitum, on the other hand (often ten feet or more in thickness), would have possessed only a single entrance in the form of a vaulted passageway into the quire. This corresponded to the " Royal Doors " in an Orthodox church which lead from the narthex into the nave (as distinct from the " Holy Doors " of the Iconostasis). While the rood screen still remains in many of our old English parish churches, it survives in only one of our large cathedral or collegiate buildings -St Alban's Cathedral. Most rood screens, in contrast to the stone pulpita, were made of wood and so have easily perished.

At St Alban's it was built of stone and has survived, whereas the pulpitum has vanished. In addition to these two screens (the rood screen and the pulpitum), a large medieval church might have had at least one more screen in the chancel. The sanctuary was often divided from the rest of the chancel by an open wooden screen known as the presbytery screen.: Again, there is only one remaining example of this screen in Britain - that in St David's Cathedral, Wales. In other churches its original position is sometimes marked by the presbytery step at which, more recently, altar rails have often been introduced. It is this screen which would have corresponded to the Iconostasis which one still finds in Byzantine churches separating the sanctuary from the nave. Like the Iconostasis, the presbytery screen may have carried sacred images, which could well explain its disappearance at the time of the Reformation.

In parish churches (most of which, during the Middle Ages, did not possess a quire with stalls) the rood screen would have fulfilled a similar function to this presbytery screen as well as dividing the church for legal reasons - the Rector being responsible for the upkeep of the

chancel, the parishioners for that of the nave - and on many of these rood screens traces of the original images still survive. They were usually painted onto the wooden panels which form the lowest part of the screen.

Finally, in many greater churches there would have been a fourth screen in the form of a reredos behind the High Altar, like those at Westminster and Winchester mentioned above. In those places where a well-known saint was buried in the retro-quire behind the High Altar (like St Cuthbert at Durham Cathedral) this reredos would have screened off the saint's shrine.

MEDIEVAL AND ORTHODOX CHURCHES COMPARED

In the Middle Ages churches were used for many more purposes than is common today. Few of our medieval cathedrals possess a narthex or porch at the west end. Thus, profane practices, such as the payment of tithes, the administration of justice and commercial transactions, as well as more irreverent activities, often took place in the naves of our medieval churches. The pulpitum was introduced in larger churches to close off the chancel so that the daily cursus of the Mass and the Office would remain undisturbed. Thus, the laity were relegated to the nave at the east end of which they were provided with their own altar (often known as the Jesus Altar) backing on to the rood screen as described above. The close relation of the medieval nave to the Orthodox narthex (in which similar activities take place today) therefore becomes clear. Apart from occasional processions, the nave was not generally utilized for any real liturgical function.

In complete contrast, for the clergy in the chancel the liturgy was a corporate act involving the entire community. All those occupying the chancel, whether canons, clerics, or monks (many of our medieval cathedrals were served by a monastic community), constituted the choir - unlike the modern practice of delegating that role to a small number of professional or amateur singers. In this respect, the medieval community which occupied the quire was in a similar position to the Orthodox laity of today. During the liturgy the nave of a Byzantine church is used to a far greater degree than in the Roman rite.

Thus, for instance, at Vespers the priest will pass around the entire church censuring both the images and all those present. The laity who occupies the nave, like the medieval clergy who occupied the chancel in the West, know and love their liturgical rites and take an active part in them finding no need for extra-liturgical devotions. It is only to be hoped and prayed for that their brethren amongst the laity of the Roman rite can come to a similar understanding and love for their own liturgical heritage, and, in particular, that we see a revival of the public recitation of the Divine Office the *opus Dei* - not as a private devotion of the clergy, which it was never meant to be, but as part of the duties of the whole People of God.

THE LAYOUT OF THE MEDIEVAL CHANCEL AND ITS RELEVANCE FOR TODAY

Now that our church naves are used only for religious activities the *raison d'être* of a quire-screen has disappeared and few would advocate screening off the chancels of our larger churches with a heavy pulpitum. To hide the chancel in this way would also be to discourage

the laity from taking a more active and intelligent role in the liturgy. The use of such a screen was, in any case, not universal even in the Middle Ages. As early as the twelfth century, Abbot Suger dispensed with its use at his new abbey church of St Denis near Paris. In contemplating the layout of the ideal chancel, however, we should bear in mind the corporate nature of the medieval liturgy (which we should seek to emulate) and the functional reasons behind the design of the medieval chancel. In particular we should not be opposed to the idea of a screen per se. As we shall see later, in larger churches the presbytery screen, and in smaller churches with no quire, the rood screen which took its place, fulfilled a very different role from the pulpitum. The removal of rood screens from some Roman Catholic parish churches, like those designed by Pugin in the nineteenth century, has been a most unfortunate act of liturgical vandalism and indicative of the lost appreciation for the contemplative and mystical aspects of the liturgy.

The chancel of a large church consists of two main parts, the quire and the sanctuary (in the Middle Ages generally known as the presbytery). The quire forms the western part of the chancel (the nave end) and is where the clergy and singers attend the solemn functions of the Mass and Office. They occupy seats or stalls arranged in rows on either side of the quire facing one another. In medieval times the last few stalls at the west (or nave) end of the quire were usually returned or placed at right-angles to the others along the back of the pulpitum facing the Altar. These were occupied by the higher dignitaries of the choir.

With the demise of the pulpitum, returned stalls are no longer used in the Roman rite and the more senior clerics now occupy the stalls at the east (or Altar) end of the quire. A medieval quire was exceedingly long so as to accommodate the very large number of clerics attached to the typical medieval foundation (some cathedrals had as many as fifty canons in addition to numerous lesser clerics). Today even the largest cathedrals are staffed by only a minuscule fraction of the number of priests they would once have had (much to the detriment of the liturgy) so that quires can afford to be somewhat shorter. This does have the advantage of bringing the sanctuary (with the Altar) closer to the nave to encourage the laity's closer association with what takes place there.

At the centre of the quire in the Middle Ages stood a large fixed choir lectern which revolved on a pivot and had two or four sides for supporting books, This was used by the cantors or rulers of the choir to intone or direct the music of certain choral parts of the Mass or Office. It should be remembered that books of any sort were then much scarcer and that clerics relied on their memory to a much greater extent. The use of such a lectern, however, is no less useful today. The placing of a surpliced quire in the chancel (rather than hidden away in a gallery) is much to be encouraged in larger churches, and the cantors then have a major ceremonial role to perform at Mass as well as at the Office (as the rubrics of the old Roman Gradual will show), so that such a lectern becomes a highly practical piece of liturgical furniture.

At the east end of the quire, roughly where the stalls ended, was a step or set of steps (the first of a number of steps as one progressed eastwards) known as the quire step. Designated soloists stood here to sing certain parts of the liturgy (for example, the Tract at Mass in many medieval Uses). A second (this time single-sided) lectern was placed, facing the Altar, at the middle of this step for their use. It is still convenient to employ two lecterns in this way in a large church, and to distinguish the purposes for which they are used. John Harper in his book *Forms and Orders of Western Liturgy from the Tenth to Eighteenth Century* points out that the two main types of chant were distinguished by a different placing of the soloists. The so-

called antiphonal chants (like the psalms and canticles of the Office or the Introit, Offertory and Communion of the Mass) were purely choir chants sung entirely within the confines of the quire, and any solo sections were sung either from the stalls or at the lectern in medio chori. For the responsorial chants (the Gradual and Alleluia at Mass or the responses and versicles at the Hours) the soloists sang their part from either the gallery of the pulpitem or the lectern at the quire step - clearly implying a spatial dialogue between the soloists and the choir. The lessons at Matins would also have been chanted at the quire step lectern. The quire step marked the end of the quire and the beginning of the presbytery.

The presbytery was divided into two large parts by a second step or set of steps - the presbytery step - a number of feet further to the east, and the presbytery screen (if there was one) was also positioned here. As we have already seen, the siting of a screen at this place is exactly analogous to that of the Iconostasis in an Orthodox church and many of the same arguments for the use of the Iconostasis can be applied to a screen placed in this position in a church of the Roman rite. The sanctuary with the High Altar is the most sacred part of the church where heaven and earth meet in the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. From very early times it became customary to hide the sanctuary with curtains (still used in Armenian and Ethiopian churches) just as in the Temple of Jerusalem the Holy of Holies was separated from the Holy Place by a veil. Often these hung between the four columns of the Altar canopy and were then known as a tetravela.

During the fourth century in Rome, Syria and Palestine a trellis wall of marble some three to five feet high was introduced, dividing the sanctuary from the rest of the church and pierced with gates. These walls were known as cancelli (from which the word chancel derives) and are still to be seen in some of the ancient churches in Rome such as San Clemente. It is only right and fitting that the sanctuary should be separated to create an atmosphere of special reverence for the Altar and to lend a sense of mystery to that most mystical of acts - the Eucharistic Liturgy. An open-work wooden screen, like the rood screens which survive in our old parish churches, does not cut off the faithful entirely from the actions which take place within the sanctuary but helps to emphasise its awesome sacredness as the abode of Christ the Heavenly Tsar. If the screen bears a Rood the symbolism is enhanced - one passes beneath the suffering Christ on the Cross and enters the sanctuary where the risen Christ returns to earth in the Eucharist.

The space between the quire and presbytery steps formed a raised platform just as in an Orthodox church there is a raised space before the Iconostasis known as the solea. The steps of the solea usually have a semi-circular extension before the Holy Doors, known as the ambo, from which in Russian churches, the gospel is sung. In some medieval Uses the Gospel (together with the Epistle, Gradual and Alleluia) was sung from the platform on top of the schola cantorum or quire. It would seem appropriate, then, for the Gospel to be sung on this elevated portion of the presbytery in full view of all, and that an ambo or lectern be placed here on the Gospel side just as it is in a Greek church. In medieval churches this most often took the form of an eagle (the symbol of St John the Evangelist) or, more rarely, a pelican in her piety .

In English cathedral churches the bishop's episcopal stall was also placed in this area on the south side (the right when facing the Altar) - exactly the position it occupies in a Greek church facing the elevated Gospel ambo on the other side. In addition, on either side, there would have been doors leading out of the presbytery and into the side aisles, for it should be remembered, the quire and presbytery were also screened off from the aisles on both sides.

These would have been used during the Middle Ages for certain processions, and are still useful today to gain access to the choir from the sacristy or elsewhere.

Beyond the presbytery step and screen was the sanctuary with the High Altar. Just as today, it was usual to elevate the Altar on several steps. Three was the usual number, to be occupied at certain times by the Priest, Deacon and Sub-deacon respectively, but there could be more or even just one. By custom an odd number is used. In many medieval churches these steps were carried across the full width of the sanctuary so that when the Priest sat to the east of the Deacon and Sub-deacon at the sedilia, placed against the wall on the right hand side, he would be elevated slightly above them. The practice of the Roman rite is that the priest sit between the Deacon and Sub-deacon and at the same level, and that the altar steps be returned to form side steps on either side so that one can ascend to the Altar from the sides as well as from the front. The form of the medieval sedilia, however - in stone with richly carved canopies and often combined in design with the piscina - is much more pleasing than the plain wooden bench one usually sees today and one well worth reviving.

Above the Altar there was always a canopy, usually in the form of a suspended wooden tester square in shape, although the older form is that of a ciborium standing on four columns. The canopy is an ancient sign of honour and should never be dispensed with. The medieval altar was often quite long, although in certain places the ancient form of altar - almost a cube in shape - survived. It is possible that the altar was lengthened to give it greater prominence when the use of a canopy on columns died out, but a return to the primitive simplicity of the cubic-shaped altar, such as one still sees in Orthodox churches, is much to be desired. Needless to say, the medieval altar was never given shelves or gradines - a useless invention of the Renaissance period - and its furniture consisted of, at most, a crucifix and two candlesticks. Any additional candles were placed behind, not on, the Altar, like the six large candles placed behind the High Altar, and lighted on double feasts, at Salisbury Cathedral. The Celebrant, when standing at the Altar, always faced the East - the place of the rising sun, the symbol of Christ - and hence the whole church was oriented in this way towards the east.

The modern notion that Mass versus populum is a return to the practice of the Early Church is a myth as several recent studies have shown. In a greater church, where the Office is performed in choir, the Blessed Sacrament should be reserved in a side chapel, not at the High Altar, and this is appropriate in smaller churches too. In medieval times the Sacrament would not, in any case, have been reserved in a tabernacle upon an altar but in an aumbry in the wall or in a hanging pyx. In recent centuries eucharistic devotion has got rather out of hand in the Roman Catholic Church, to the detriment of the Office which is the sanctification of time. Fr. Robert Taft, in his book *The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West* puts it very well when he says that most Catholics now receive a very unbalanced spiritual diet based almost entirely on the Eucharist - like daily serving dinner with only a main course. The multiplication of masses we now have in the West is indicative of this mentality. In the East the Eucharistic Liturgy is celebrated only once in the same church on any one day.

Attendance at the Sunday Eucharist therefore becomes a true expression of Unity. Extra-liturgical eucharistic adoration developed out of the practice of reservation - not the other way round. The principal reason for reserving the Sacrament is so that it can be given in Holy Communion to the sick. We adore simply because we happen to reserve; we do not reserve in order that we might adore. Finally, in some of our medieval cathedrals the Bishop's Throne, or Cathedra, was still situated in its ancient position behind the High Altar, facing westwards. This placing dates back to the very dawn of the Christian Era when the Bishop on his Throne

dominated the assembly of the Faithful. It is not, as some commentators have assumed, associated with a versus populum position at Mass, nor necessarily with the practice in some churches of having the entire choir behind the Altar, but it does, of course, exactly correspond with the arrangement of every Orthodox church which is always equipped with a bishop's throne behind the Altar and where the Divine Liturgy is never celebrated facing the people. The notable example in England is that of Norwich Cathedral where the Throne occupies a very elevated position in the centre of the apse immediately behind the High Altar. During the course of the Middle Ages this position for the Throne came to be abandoned in many places, probably as a result of the practice of burying a saint in a shrine behind the Altar, which has been referred to above.

The *Cæremoniale Episcoporum* of the Roman rite still permits this arrangement for the Throne, and, indeed, describes it before the alternative practice of placing the Throne on the Gospel side of the sanctuary. When the Throne is thus situated in the centre of the apse, seats are provided on either side, in the two quarter-circles along the walls of the apse, for the use of the Canons when accompanying the Bishop, just as an Orthodox church has seats in those positions for the Bishop's concelebrants. Also, the apse is often raised above the level of the Altar by steps, as in the Basilica of St Ambrose in Milan - in an Orthodox church it is actually known as the High Place.