

CHURCH OF OUR LADY OF GUADALUPE

TAOS, NEW MEXICO

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In designing a Catholic church today, an architect is faced with a bewildering choice of new techniques and building materials, but the basic problem still remains unchanged: to provide a seemly and reverent environment for the sacrifice of the Mass and the administration of the other sacraments of the Church. Over the centuries this goal was somewhat obscured, the basic plan had become stereotyped, the ornament crystalized and even meaningless. An attempt to break out of this dead-end seems to have taken two directions: (1) an increasing use of sculpture, marble, mosaic and other rich materials both on the interior and exterior; (2) and an increasing use of exposed structural elements and prefabricated materials in a desperate attempt to achieve freshness or to be different. Either of these approaches *used alone* — though it may provide dazzling or unusual buildings — will surely lead us farther from a solution of the basic problem and farther from functional architecture in the truest sense of that word.

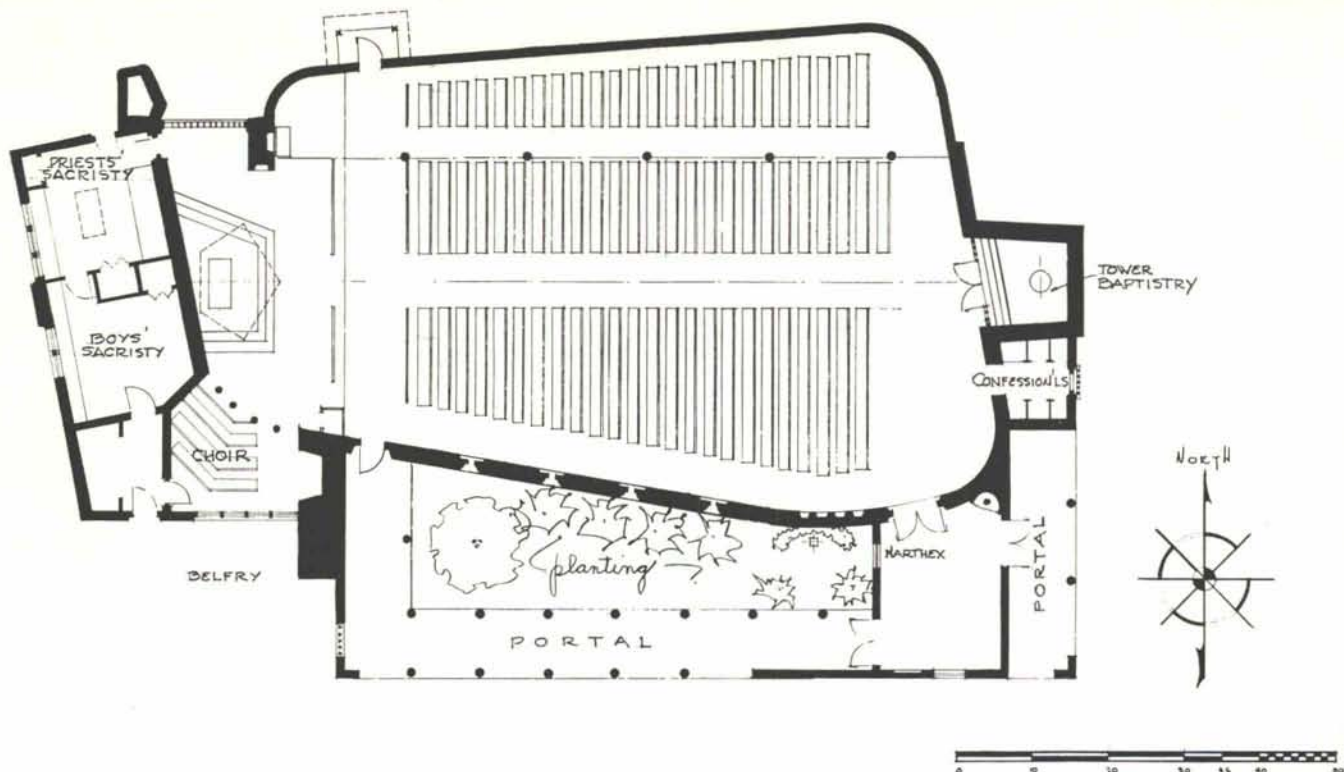
When an individual architect sets out to design a truly functional church building, a church that has honesty and integrity and a straightforward expression of its purpose, he usually comes up against a solid crust of opposition. The team opposing him may include the clergy, the parish council, the public, the suppliers of church goods, the suppliers of building material — and even his own colleagues in the profession. But once in a great while the fates will decide to relent, and the architect will look around to discover with surprise that he is working with others in a united effort to produce a really fine church building. In such a situation where the architect is given great freedom in the design, the faith that others have placed in his judgement carries with it heavy responsibility. Most architectural laymen — including the clergy — are not really able to visualize the completed building from preliminary plans or even from perspective drawings. They must, therefore, trust the architect to give them a good building. While they have absolved him from using traditional architecture and ornamental *styles* they expect him to adhere to tradition in expressing the timeless and unchanging character of the Mass, the other sacraments, and the universality of the Roman Catholic religion.

Just such a fine opportunity, together with its associated responsibility, was given to our firm in the

commission to design a new church for the parish of Our Lady of Guadalupe at Taos. When the first preliminary design — itself the result of several years of study — was presented to the pastor, Monsignor Albert Chavez, he was immediately enthusiastic and urged that it be presented to the parish council at an early date. This alert and realistic group of men studied the plans and asked intelligent questions until they felt that they understood what we were trying to do, then they gave their whole hearted approval to the design. Next, the pastor and the architect presented the plans to the Archbishop of Santa Fe, His Excellency the Most Reverend Edwin Vincent Byrne. The Archbishop showed both his appreciation of what we were attempting and real courage when he approved this unusual building. The archdiocesan building commission next studied and finally approved the plans; working drawings and specifications were prepared, and the building is now under construction.

After the basic scheme was decided upon, there remained the problem of making this non-traditional building fit harmoniously into the landscape and townscape of the world-famous community of Taos. Here economics come to our help. The council decided to build the church of adobe, and the parishoners said they would donate the adobes. Then, the Taos Pueblo Indians agreed to donate the tree for *vigas* and the saplings for *latillas*. We shall thus have a modern church of vigorous and fresh design using traditional materials in new ways — not for the purpose of being “different” but for the purpose of restoring to the church building its ancient liturgical expression and integrity.

The first consideration was that the church must be correct liturgically, and that it must express in the actual architecture — both inside and out — the importance of the two great Sacraments of Baptism and The Holy Eucharist. The altar stands at the point of focus of all the curving and perspective lines of the building. It is given added importance by the liturgically designed canopy, and brought further into prominence by the great quantity of natural light spilling in from the richly grilled sanctuary window. On the exterior the location of the altar is marked by the open belfry. The Baptistry, along with the Confessionals, stands at its proper place at the back of the church symbolizing the fact that one must be cleansed from all sin before one approaches the altar to receive



the Blessed Sacrament. From the nave of the church one sees the whole of the Baptistry softly lighted from above and separated from the remainder of the church only by its open grille. The Baptismal font itself shows prominently in the natural light from above. To enter the Baptistry one must go down three steps, and again this is symbolic of the ancient descent into the river. On the exterior the Baptistry is expressed by the prominent east tower. The four high tower windows admit light which is then diffused through the luminous ceiling of the Baptistry.

A very important factor determining the shapes of this church is, of course, the moving light of the sun. One must be able to see well in the church, but there should never be any unpleasant glare. Obviously one must be able to read a missal anywhere in the church, but the high altar must be the bright spot. The clerestorey windows of clear glass and the tall south windows of colored glass will provide a soft, even light in the nave while the skylights will light the side aisle. The nave windows stop short of the back portion of the church — and this also is for a purpose. The back walls of the church must be shadowy enough so that the soft light shining through the Baptistry ceiling will stand out by contrast and point up the importance of the Sacrament of Baptism.

With modern sound systems in most churches today it is always possible for the congregation to hear the sermon. Here it will be possible (without microphones) for the congregation to hear the *Mass* itself. The angles of the side walls of the nave and the angle of the tilted canopy over the altar have been determined by acoustical requirements so that everyone in the church should be able to hear the priest at *Mass*.

The choir has been located to the side, next to the sanctuary, but separated from it by a row of columns. This will make for good rapport between the celebrant of the *Mass* and the Choir. It will also allow the sound of the choir to partake of the acoustical planning of the chancel area. With the separating columns the choir may wear street clothes, or it may be vested

in cassocks and surplices to contribute still more to the dignity of the sacrifice of the *Mass*.

In addition to these liturgical and symbolic considerations, this church is designed for function and the convenience of those who will use it. The ceilings are kept moderately low to reduce the heating expense. The main entrances are on the south and the east where they may be reasonably free from snow and ice on winter mornings, and there is a long south portal to allow persons to alight from cars directly under shelter in bad weather. The small garden enclosed by this portal is reminiscent of the atrium at Ranchos de Taos, and serves as an island of peace and repatriation between the commercial hustle of the street and the serenity and reverence of the interior of the church.

Built of humble materials with a low budget, this building will depend for effect upon its liturgical order, its flowing spaces, its use of natural light, and its carefully calculated proportions. Using this oldest palette in the world, we hope to build a church for which the words of the dedicatory *Mass* will truly apply: "TER-RIBILIS EST LOCUS ISTE . . ." — this is indeed an awesome place, truly the house of God.

—John McHugh

