New churches, old Europe

by Philip Jenkins in the June 10, 2015 issue

Jubilee Church in Rome was designed by New York-based architect Richard Meier. 

European churches are currently engaged in an architectural culture war.

Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi declared the outbreak of hostilities in 2013 with a sweeping condemnation of many recently built churches in Italy, which, he said, were intended to win design prizes rather than to serve the needs of liturgy. Instead of seeking to create a suitable mood for celebration or meditation, architects have extolled abstract geometric form. Ignoring religious needs, they "tend instead to focus on space, lines, light and sound."

Nonsense, replied those progressive architects. Concepts of the appropriate setting for Christian worship have changed enormously through the centuries. Throughout history reactionaries have condemned innovative buildings that over time come to be recognized as epochal masterpieces.

I can see both sides in this debate, although I do take Ravasi's point that some recent structures seem deliberately intended to infuriate traditionalists. What is most startling is that such a debate is raging at a time when Europe's mainstream churches have been so weakened by secularization and when the Roman Catholic Church in particular faces so many challenges. Yet, as in centuries past, these institutions are not only creating many new buildings but serving as key patrons of great architects.

Just in the present century, many impressively experimental new churches have appeared in European cityscapes. Italy has produced some of the most discussed projects, including the two that have been at the center of the conservative counter-attack. One, San Giacomo at Foligno, was designed to replace an older edifice devastated by an earthquake. (Images of all these buildings can be found online.)

Designed by Massimiliano and Doriana Fuksas, the Foligno church consists of two gigantic rectangular blocks, and the interior contains virtually nothing by way of traditional Catholic symbols or iconography. The overall aesthetic recalls the black monoliths of the film *2001*.

In Rome itself, the Jubilee Church stands in the district of Tor Tre Teste. Its most striking feature is the series of three gigantic curved concrete walls that overlap each other and make up the church's south side.

For the uninstructed, both churches look like exercises in geometric form totally severed from any historic Catholic past. Their advocates, though, laud the spectacular effects of natural light, suggesting the divine presence permeating the whole interior space. And does not the simple white of the concrete materials proclaim purity and holiness in the midst of the modern city?

Anyone interested in cutting-edge architecture could arrange quite an extensive tour of modern-day Catholic Europe and its booming pilgrimage shrines. Destinations would include the Sicilian Sanctuary of Madonna Lacrime, Our Lady of Tears, a shrine constructed in the form of a gigantic teardrop; or the enormous sanctuary of San Giovanni Rotondo, which commemorates the famous holy man Padre Pio. This was the work of world-famous architect Renzo Piano.

In the north of Italy is Turin's Santo Volto, the Church of the Holy Face, designed by Mario Botta. Despite its medieval-sounding dedication, this is a shrine to modernism of the most austere and industrial kind, and the interior offers many grim walls, in contrast to the abundant side altars and stained glass that once adorned Italian churches.

Spain since 2000 has witnessed a building boom in new worship facilities, the most controversial being the parish church of Santa Monica in the Madrid suburb of Rivas-Vaciamadrid. What the architects term "an explosion of north-facing skylights" gives the building the appearance of a receding starship. The same firm has also produced several other much-reviewed churches in smaller regional towns. As in Italy, these

designs are as admired by professional architects as they are loathed by baffled parishioners.

The architectural tour could proceed in almost any direction, but it should include Vienna’s Donau City Church, with a front that initially looks as if black concrete blocks have been piled to create a barricade.

Much more attractive for ordinary viewers are some of the newer churches in the Low Countries, such as Rotterdam’s St. Mary of the Angels, which has almost a Chinese or Japanese aesthetic. At Maassluis in the Netherlands, the Church of St. Peter and Paul uses a series of sinuous waveforms that recalls the legendary Sydney Opera House. In the design powerhouses of Scandinavia, state-supported Lutheran churches have likewise created buildings that would have puzzled bygone generations.

Some of these new buildings will come to be regarded as classics, while others might fare more poorly. But the paradox remains. Churches that are supposedly in irreversible decline are contributing to Europe’s cultural and artistic progress.