

own design. He was confirmed there's also nothing that

Free Our Churches From the Ugly and Stupid

HOUSES OF WORSHIP
By Anthony Esolen

I have seen, in Catholic churches, minimalist Stations of the Cross that hardly can be recognized as depictions of the Passion. I have seen crosses that look as if a modernist Jesus were flying with wings outspread, like a theological pterodactyl. I have seen the Eucharist relegated to what looks like a broom closet. I have seen a baptismal font that bubbles. I have seen beautifully tiled floors, with intricate cruciform patterns, covered over with plush red carpet.

I have heard for decades effeminate "hymns" with the structure and melody of off-Broadway show tunes. I have read hymn texts altered so as to obliterate references to God with the personal pronoun "He." This music would not be acceptable for a jingle to sell jelly doughnuts on television.

I have seen and heard enough. We must get rid of everything ugly and stupid from our churches, most of it visited upon them since the great iconoclasm of the 1960s. What's needed is genuine art that stirs the imagination and pleases the eye, that entices the soul with beauty before a single word of a sermon is uttered.

Let me use an analogy. I am involved in the restoration of an old home that for more than 100 years served as the rectory of a Catholic parish in

Nova Scotia. One of the first things we did was to tear out carpeting that had gotten dingy and moldy. Beneath lay plywood and linoleum. And underneath that?

We found in most of the rooms oak and maple floors, with three-inch-wide strips laid in handsome patterns, squares enclosing diagonals, and a large diamond set in the center of the original parlor. The craftsmanship was impressive, the execution precise. Other floors had large planks of seasoned hemlock, which absorbs moisture from the air and grows tougher from it. The hemlock is as old as the home's foundation.

This kind of plywood covers beauty everywhere in today's churches. You are not only walking on it. You are looking at plywood on the walls, hearing plywood from the pulpit, and singing plywood instead of hymns.

The first thing we can do to return beauty to our churches is to swallow chronological snobbery and find out what our ancestors, even those who could not read or write, achieved. I am speaking about more than the fine craftsmanship of well-turned balusters and newels, though we should desire that too.

Take the hymnals. It is now easier than ever to recover books out of print. Find the great "English Hymnal" of 1906 (revised 1933). Like all the old hymnals, its music is scored for four-part harmony.

Congregations within living memory learned from childhood how to sing hymns accordingly. The result is sublime, inviting what is now the rarest of birds, the bass or baritone voice of a man in full worship and self-forgetfulness.

Roman Catholics had the old missals and graduals with hundreds of haunting and intricate chants, each one composed to fit the meaning and

The great iconoclasm of the 1960s buried much of Christianity's best art and music.

the sound of a particular text. Those chants, and the great Protestant hymns of the last 500 years, are peerless.

Also consider the intimate architecture of a church's interior. A baseball fan goes to the park and expects the area between the foul lines to be "sacred" space, which he would never think of crossing between innings. He expects for the game a decorum that he has forgotten to demand in the most significant part of his life. Catholic hierarchs, in a fit of beauty smashing, got the strange idea that human beings enjoy spaces without definition or purpose.

What might happen if devout and sensible people were given the freedom to determine

how to embody in the church interior what they believe and celebrate? They would revive choir lofts, rather than throwing a karaoke machine up front. They would insist upon kneelers, because they would insist upon kneeling. There is nothing strange about building and beautifying a small chapel, or a room set apart for prayer or sacred reading.

I'm not sanguine about sacred painting and sculpture, because artists sufficiently competent are as rare now as people who can write poetry in meter. But if we cannot create the art right away, we can at least adopt what has already been done and what is easily available.

Today, the word of God is proclaimed in translations that have all the charm and wonder of a corporate memorandum. Must ordinary people be fed the drab and insipid? The politically correct—another thing thrust upon people by their ecclesiastical betters—is always ugly. Get rid of it, period, no excuses, no exceptions. What Christ hath spoken well, let man not paraphrase. Let grace in the word be one humble way in which we show our desire and our gratitude for the grace of God.

Mr. Esolen is a professor at Providence College. This piece is adapted from his book "Out of the Ashes: Rebuilding American Culture," published in January by Regnery.