

Last Sunday most of you heard in your parish churches the readings for the 23rd Ordinary Sunday of the Year and, presumably, a homily elaborating on them. But here in the Saint Louis Abbey church we celebrated the anniversary of the dedication of this building and its consecration to God as a special place of worship.

The earliest Christian churches were modeled on the Roman basilica, an official meeting place usually designed as a large rectangular hall with a curved region at the end where the officers presided. So there was a progression forwards and the eye was drawn horizontally to the focal point. As architects developed the skill of supporting roofs on thinner walls and columns than in the very solid Romanesque style they were able to increase the height of the building and the eye was drawn upwards to heaven. The great cathedrals of western Europe were built in this Gothic style. A circular church was less common, although for the Greek mathematicians the circle was the most perfect form, emphasizing completeness. It was the same from every direction, with no sharp corners like rectangles or squares or triangles and it symbolized eternity. While it can still have soaring arches, the center of a circular church is the focal point towards which the eye is drawn and the action at the central altar becomes the principal element of worship.

I came to St. Louis and to this monastery in 1959, just after the first monks had decided to build a circular church. My training before I became a monk at Ampleforth was in engineering, so it was fascinating for me to see this church grow from the ground upwards in the period between March 1960 and September 1962. The building contractors devised a way of spraying a thick mix concrete onto a single wooden form instead of the more usual technique of pouring wet concrete between two forms. So they constructed five arches out of twenty in wood, upper and lower, one fourth of the church, in such a way that the wooden forms could be separated and moved to a new position. When five lower and upper arches had been poured (or more accurately, sprayed) they were supported at the center by huge telephone poles. Then the first forms were detached and leapfrogged around to the sixth position – and so on until the full circle of twenty bays had been completed. The monastery at that time was located where the north side of the present monastic quadrangle, built in the year 2000, now exists, the side nearest to the church. We were using some of the first floor rooms as classrooms and study areas for the school in the 1960 – 62 period, so you can imagine the distractions for classes whose windows faced the church. The amount of window space in this church allows a lot of light while the windows were also designed to reduce the brilliant glare of a sunny day. When you worship God in this church the focus is the action taking place at the altar and a splash of color is provided by the vestments of the ministers; your eye is not distracted by colored glass on the periphery.

The ceremony of the consecration of a church is modeled on the liturgy of baptism and confirmation and the same holy oil which is used to anoint the hands of a priest in his ordination rite and in the baptism of every Christian as he or she is dedicated to God and claimed as a child of God, is used to anoint the altar and the walls of the church, dedicating them to the worship and service of God. I was the Master of Ceremonies at that time, so I had to be involved in the planning of the consecration of this church and its altars. This was before concelebration became a common practice after the Second Vatican Council, and all the priests said their daily Masses at the separate altars which you still see around the perimeter of the church. The dedication took two days, with the side altars being consecrated on the first day and the main altar and the building itself consecrated on the second day.

While a church building is important as a place set apart for the honor and glory of God, for the worship of him and for the administration of the sacraments, it is the people who are really important. A dedicated and consecrated building would be pointless and meaningless without people. The people of God are the church. You are the church. St. Paul tells us: You are part of a building "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself for its main cornerstone. Through him the whole structure is held together and grows into a temple sacred in the Lord; in him you also are being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit." St. Paul also says; "You are God's temple and God's Spirit lives in you." We are the living stones built up into a single structure. We support one another. If any stone of an edifice is removed from its place, the whole structure is weakened. This is true not only of the foundation stone but of each individual stone. A single stone dislodged from an arch will cause the whole arch to collapse. Each stone has a part to play and without it the rest are weakened. Each of us has been assigned a place by God in the structure that is his Church and if we desert our post, God's plan is in danger of being frustrated.

Sometimes we find it difficult to be content with the role assigned to us; we may think we could be of better service or more use in another place, another part of the building. But the individual stone does not have the luxury of standing back and seeing the whole structure. It does not have the perspective of the master craftsman. We, the living stones, must trust in the wisdom of God, the master craftsman. Each of us has a role to play in God's plan. May we be open to learning his will for us, and may we be given the courage to carry it out. +