

The New "MOTHER CHURCH": Ten years later

Translated from the Italian by Benjamin De Maio Montalbano

Ten years ago, on the evening of December 18, in front of an emotional and satisfied crowd of people, the "Mother Church" was re-opened to worship. The Church had been rebuilt from the ground up and was re-consecrated by the bishop, His Excellency, Monsignor Mario Milano. Another element, which was among the most meaningful for the Calitrano community, was added to the mosaic of the long awaited, talked about, and still incomplete "reconstruction." The architecture put back what was already there: majestic, essential, simple, and elegant in its external lines and suggestive and welcoming in its three-naved construction. The structure has classic style and gives rise to an urbanistic treatment that is centered on a well-thought-out amalgam between its supporting structure and its aesthetic structure.

The designer's effort to create continuity and harmony between the old and new is evident even to the eyes of the nonprofessional. The exterior is compact, unadorned, clean, and unobtrusive. The church courtyard that lays

majestically at the front face and the rose-shaped window that dominates above like an eye that observes and looks into the distance represent a unique coquettishness that wants to



The Mother Church "San Canio"

flaunt the boldness of a certain aesthetic sophistication. It is as if the author had deliberately wanted to escape overlapping interpretations, in order to concentrate attention on the scene inside the church. In fact, here, as soon as you set foot in the church, you hear the deep and prolonged sigh of magnificent things, you sense the atmosphere of the ineffable that seizes and enchants you as soon as you look up, to the point that you feel dizzy. Shrewdly enlarged both in height and

depth, the spaces give the impression both of distance and elusiveness. Moreover, while you realize how small and insignificant you are with respect to these spaces, the concept of the im-

mensity of God erupts in your mind with irrepressible arrogance.

The outward appearance of the "Mother Church," is, we said, austere, poor, and has an almost infantile geometric linearity; but, its internal appearance is something else entirely. Here, the very original,

concentric-elliptical-ring cupola narrows upward like an upturned Dantean Paradise. The rings filter and distribute the light that rains in from the outside and cascades down upon the main altar with a low density and with soft, golden reflections. The airy and protective nave is supported on two rows of molded pillars that are

connected by arches flowing into a wide barrel vault. The two side naves, which have ribbed vaults, are also supported by a succession of pointed columns, as well as composing and harmoniously expressing the strength of the entire consecrated building. These create an intensely spiritual atmosphere and give a sense of inner calm, of protection, and of safety that instill a yearning for meditation and silence.

It was necessary to build The "MOTHER CHURCH" precisely in Calitri for two reasons: firstly, to function primarily as a holy place where one may purify oneself of sins and errors, and, secondly, for the artistic-architectural value that it confers on the upper side of the entrance in the old historic center. And today, after thirteen years of construction, and after another ten years from the time it was reopened for worship, the church is still there, intact and majestic as ever. It is structurally as solid as a rock, as well as large and monumental. The church is tragic and mysterious ever since it was painfully hit and lacerated in its human framework, which was its strongest and most authentic support. It was as if it were insisting that it wanted to remain the widow of its strongest ministers. Moreover, while its physical space is very limited, the great edifice ideally crosses the surrounding masonry, dilates the walls, and exceeds the dimension of the defined space. Consequently, the amalgam of iron and cement acquires meaning, penetrates into the consciousness of the faithful, and ends up becoming the personal Church of conscience. Yet, as admirable as it is as a whole, even if it again became a temple of God and a place of prayer where the Calitriani can come to pass the time with Him, to everybody, the architecture still lacks something important and of major religious significance. It lacks something new that hints of the old and it lacks a little bit of good taste. The irresistible attraction of the work of art from the top of the cupola near the high altar, from the sidewalls and from any marble or wooden altars, could reinforce and intensify the message of our Christianity. Currently, inside so majestic a build-

ing, you can admire the work of the architect, but not the work of the painter, the sculptor, and the stuccoist. You notice the absence of the solemn luminosity of the colors and of the bib-



The Mother Church "San Canio" - nave

lical images.

Imagine if, in time, the colonnade that supports the arches of the nave were to be faced with marble and that there be a monument-like projection toward the thinnest and most solemn top of the high altar. Imagine that you can finally render functional the "choir" that has been organized on the inside top of the entrance door and destined to be the definitive structure for the organ, as well as for performances of the choir. If you can imagine all this as well as the church being a site of worship and religious celebrations, then the "Mother Church" could become a gallery of art for the tourists as well as the faithful.

At times, the visual language of the artistic creations that tell – with brush and chisel – the story of the Old and

New Testament, the life and martyrdom of the saints, which is associated with the word of the officiant at the altar and with the direct reading of the sacred texts, penetrates more deeply

into the consciences and better reveals the meaning of the sacred scriptures from which they draw inspiration. There are moments in which the heart that is afflicted by existing difficulties seeks comfort and finds more in the holy image than in the live listening to the word of God. Consequently, the Church, which is the place of prayer, the refuge of disturbed consciences asking relief from the Lord in order to escape the clashes of a distracted and pleasure seeking society, becomes the most appropriate place to preserve the work of the inspired artist who knows how to communicate with the super terrestrial world and to placate the anxiety of the Absolute. By now, "realism" and "mysticism" have become two co-present and conflicting elements in our parish because the "House of God" is increasingly being reduced to a "house of man," which is not a good sign for the true Christian. Moreover, considering that, as things stand today, it is now too late to go back, we are at least sure that this "house of man" does not get the upper hand on "The House of God."

In a period of general corruption, of unbridled, self-centered tendencies, and of the resurgence of every kind of barbarism, a new vital force to help restore hope and faith in the total recovery of man is useful. And since even art, sacred art, naturally, helps man to pull himself out from the abominations of a totally material life, we allow this art, with all its beauty, its strength, and its charm, to enter the Church of God of the faithful Calitriani. Moreover, we preserve this art with the same care and the same devotion with which we preserve inside us the profound moral principles of our religion.

Gerardo Melaccio