

# CHURCHES ARE OURS – BUT BEFORE THIS, THEY ARE HIS

■ BY AURELIO PORFIRI\*

I remember the time of my adolescence, during my visits to the beautiful Roman churches. At one point I felt like I was at home, but not as if the church *belonged* to me. It was like the feeling of being in your parents' home: it's your home, but only up to a point. Then I really came to understand that that church was not simply a building used for religious services, but the house of God.

Yet, growing up, it increasingly seemed to me as if we were being taught a “squatter” attitude, that is, those who occupy a place and prevent the rightful owner from using it. Of course you can do this with anyone, but it is a bit difficult to succeed at it with God. Yet there are people, including not a few priests, who believe that by making *our* music, *our* ceremonies, *our* gatherings, the church will always be a little more *ours*.

In reality, it is always *His*, because a church without God is a contradiction. Who would it be for?

I hear a lot about these times of “post-theism,” that is, an attitude in which the God we are used to no longer makes sense. Obviously, theology tells us how complex it is for finite human beings to attempt to speak of the One who is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, eternal. Nevertheless, the church, like the temple for the Jews, allows men and women with their limitations to place themselves in the presence of the Presence.

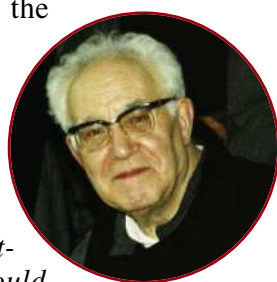
## A DIVINE CERTAINTY

In a text from 1957, the great Italian mystic **Divo Barsotti** (1914-2006) said:

*What can all the human greatness that we could hope for could*



“JESUS IS ALWAYS THERE IN THE TABERNACLE – WHERE HE, GOD, HAS CHOSEN TO CONFINE HIMSELF TO A SPACE SO THAT WE CAN ALWAYS FIND HIM AND VENERATE HIM.”



*possibly be? It is nothing compared to the supernatural greatness we still hope for. And our hope is invincible, it is a divine certainty. This is the hope that animates us day by day, even while our dreams fall; remaining alive, invincible in the heart, it continually lifts us up and pushes us on a restless journey towards God. It is this hope that day by day impels us on to new effort, prevents us from abandoning ourselves as conquered, discouraged, disappointed. It is this hope that moves us every day in an ever new search for God. He is far away: yet, people still young in strength and love, we tend to Him; we will seek Him until death and we will never be able to say that we have achieved Him. The longer He lives in our*

*hearts, the greater will be the soul's anxiety to possess Him, because the more we possess Him, the more we will realize that He remains beyond our every grasp, elusive, unattainable, immense.*

*Oh! Seek God! It is the whole Christian life, our whole life. If our life is to be a return to a lost paradise, it must be a continuous conversion, a continuous journey, without fatigue. Come! The Lord has called us, we must begin our sojourn now... Forward! No fear and no discouragement. It is He who lives in our hearts, it is He who gives us the power to seek Him and to find Him: God!*

And in order to grant us this power, God wanted us to meet Him also in places of beauty, which in many cases are churches, to pray with HIS music, to participate in HIS ceremonies, to be summoned to HIS gatherings.

God has not left us alone; he has given us a tradition in which to meet Him, a tradition that today seems almost a dirty word. I don't like being defined as a “traditionalist,” but can it really be such an offense? What are we going to do today in our churches if we do not yearn to

rejoin that tradition which is the way to meet God?

And this does not mean the rejection of contemporaneity; but it does mean entering contemporaneity with even more depth. Some clerics think that offering a superficial contemporaneity serves to bring people back to God. No, I don't think so – and the experience of these last five decades has taught us that this is in fact not the case. We cannot be medieval men, but we must be contemporary men who still know how to look at the world with a gaze that captures the beauty and sacredness of things.

## LITTLE BY LITTLE

The Brazilian thinker **Plinio Corrêa de Oliveira** (1908-1995) had this beautiful thought:

*The conquest of truth begins as a slow explanation of what is already known. It is not through a book, but by putting in order the new things that we gradually become aware of, always according to that fundamental common sense of those first evidences. [...] The conquest of truth is more or less a march de proche en proche [little by little]. From the truths I know, I do not jump immediately to the most remote truths, but instead walk modestly in the direction of the nearest ones. Then, I will walk from them to still others, even if I have already intuited the ultimate truth; because sometimes it does happen that one can intuit the ultimate truth.*

*I build the proof de proche en proche. But I do it without ostentation or fuss, in a humble, solid, organic way, without agitation. Speaking of which, I would argue that our most valuable book - by a long shot! - is each of us ourself. Indeed, we are not a book; each of us is an entire library, which contains immensely more than the libraries where actual books are located. No one has ever written everything that can be found in a man's mind. [...] What does a book do? It helps me to grasp some data I need, it gives me some thoughts well-founded by someone else, but it never happens that a whole book is poured into my head, in the Christian way. Really, that's it! The book is a simple repository of materials for my construction. It is therefore not a question of reading everything, nor of being aware of all the arguments, but of drawing from it a basic, fundamental, solid notion, which at times one cannot even be able to demonstrate in a discussion.*

*What then is the test of certainty? The consonance between what is stated and the data coming from common sense that everyone has. I argue that it is from this mental process that certainties arise, because it is an initial certainty, which will develop de proche en proche.*

*Ultimately, however, it is nothing more than a projection of the sense of good and evil, and of that innate sense*



*of truth and error, which is refined and becomes more and more rigorous. (Plinio Corrêa de Oliveira in: Roberto de Mattei, Plinio Corrêa de Oliveira, Apostle of Fatima, Prophet of the Kingdom of Mary).*

## TO THE UNKNOWN GOD

Using this example, I can say that in our churches at one time the Church made available to us the best of music, painting, literature, doctrine, preaching, so that we would be able to get closer and closer to the supreme truth.

What is left of all this?

Yet, however much we might want, we could never drive God out of His house: however much we outrage Him, He remains there, patient, and awaits us. The church, every church, even the less beautiful ones (and unfortunately there are more and more of them) remains His home, *templum Dei*. But it is a house in which we cannot lock Him up, as if He did not dwell in all things: “*Passing in fact and observing the monuments of your cult, I also found an altar with the inscription: To the unknown God. What you adore without knowing, I announce to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, who is lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples built by the hands of man, allowing himself to be served as if he needed something, being he who gives everyone life and breath and everything. He created all the nations of men out of one, to dwell on all the face of the earth. For them he established the order of times and the boundaries of their space, so that they might seek God, if they ever come to find him by groping, although he is not far from each of us. In fact, in him we live, move and exist, as some of your poets also have said: for we are his offspring*” (Acts 17, 23-28).

Yet, despite these words that we certainly cannot forget, Jesus is always there in the tabernacle – where He, God, has chosen to confine Himself to a space so that we can always find Him and venerate Him, with the confidence of children, but also with the respect that is certainly due to a Mystery so great.

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