

CHAPEL OF DISCLOSURE

1. Yearning for Liberative Insight

Churches and chapels continue to draw our attention. Some even attract considerable numbers, although the crowds tend to limit themselves to the traditional religious rituals: funerals, remembrance services, exceptional events, major church feasts. Churches are also 'lent out' for concerts, semi-public celebrations and special occasions. Others have been redesignated, have acquired a different purpose, not always in line with their original significance. The majority of school chapels have already undergone such a transformation, and no longer function as they did in the past, or serve the purposes for which they were constructed.

The liturgical renewal heralded by Vatican II was a partial answer to the problem of rites and interpretations that had left the tracks, as it were, in the course of history. Harmony with the faith's original source of inspiration was restored to some degree, although recent developments suggest that this was only a provisional restoration.

Parallel with the backslide in church practice, a plethora of initiatives have emerged in search of "alternative space". Disorganised, extremely diverse, often exceptionally creative, spaces have been established here and there, intent on exposing the core of what we want to say when we speak of meaning, sacred engagement, religiosity, evangelical living, rites, healing and redemption.

Well-kept and judiciously restored traditional churches and chapels have likewise provided a mature and integrated path towards the same core. Architectural design, artefacts, memories of times gone by, of people who remain close, of established rites, continue to fascinate, even today. People want to be moved by them at their own pace and rhythm, to engage with a spatial and ritual pattern that allows them to assimilate traces of past events and the story of their lives in an intuitive and symbolic manner.

The renovation of the De La Salle Centre chapel is part of this renewal movement, in line with the wishes of those who have ties with it.

2. This is Sacred Ground

Disclosing the Past, the Present and the Future

Heirs and Successors

The De La Salle Centre is fused with a historic site, an important location in the history of the church in Brabant. Tall shady trees conceal the ruins of a former abbey of Benedictine nuns, testimony to the great renewals of the twelfth century, of the Council of Trent, and the various movements that characterised modern spirituality. Hope, inspiration and trust determined the existence of many generations, alongside the destruction and loss that are unique to the historical process that governs the lives of individuals and communities.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the De La Salle Brothers found a fitting place here to provide a basis for their work in Flanders. In 1924, a retreat centre with its own chapel was constructed on the foundations of a sixteenth century building, formerly the residence of the abbey's abbesses. The centre provided space of Christian and spiritual formation for many decades.

The building presently houses the Flemish Lasallian Perspective's headquarters for the pedagogical and pastoral administration of the Flemish schools and other activities that form part of its network. These new people also trust that their inspiration will root itself here in fertile soil.

The purpose and use of the site is also undergoing a transformation. The silent memory of centuries of engagement on the ruins of God's abbey, the lofty trees, the tranquil endearing grass, shelter a "discrete space": intimate, peaceful, reflective, receptive, ready to secretly cherish the joys and burdens people carry within themselves. Will this mystery acquire a new form of continuity? The chapel of the De La Salle Centre is surrounded on one side by nature's contemplative silence and on the other by today's professional meeting culture.

A Twofold Narrative

The radical new design of the chapel from 1924 is a first step towards transcending contemporary religious alienation. The original architecture has been preserved unchanged. Seen from the outside it would appear that nothing has changed. The building radiates modesty. Its structure conceals a closed timber-framed space, modestly illuminated by a number of harmoniously designed stained glass windows. At the south end, in the apse above the altar, there are three smaller stained glass windows portraying the

crucifixion of Jesus, with Mary and John to the right and left. Six windows on the first floor to the west and four to the north evoke figures and fragments from the spiritual legacy of the site. The windowless wall to the east has five alcoves with wall paintings depicting the virtues. There are no windows at ground level. The visitor is drawn towards the interior of the Christian confession of faith.

The building's traditional design cannot be transplanted in its entirety. Its historical specificities threaten to distract visitors from the chapel's original goal. Tradition can only acquire relevance in a true-to-life and aesthetic recreation.

The renovation of the chapel's interior is a different story. "Traditional" points of recognition have been shuttered away to create a new environment. The visitor enters an open, apparently undefined space: no centre, no orientation, no images. There are no artefacts, no familiar liturgical features, nothing to stimulate customary ritual behaviour. A white ceiling, walls with white shutters separated by thin red vertical lines, a carpet of white sand. The ambiance is one of austere and serene receptivity towards the visitor and the visitor's inner reality. The use of shutters obstructs the recognition of structure, stained glass windows and figures. They turn us back towards our personal interaction with the indefinable. They bracket the space's original Christian symbolism, as if it never existed. The apse has been subjected to a rigid functional reduction.

In its new form the empty space speaks its own language and follows its own grammar: not figurative, but abstract. It is the language of interior silence, of the liberated spirit, of our awareness, of sensing a personal call. As if an opportunity is being offered to embrace new life, to breathe anew. People who encounter one another in this space recognise the surplus value of their participation in something different, in something that claims them, unexpectedly, unforeseen.

Fertile Tension

This twofold articulation of form conveys contrast. The tension between the unchanged exterior and the a-thematic interior alludes to the intangibility of the sacral, of the mystery of God in humankind, of the Son of Man, the Anointed. The chapel presents believers with something inaccessible. Neither the exterior nor the interior disclose the mystery in themselves. The tension between both establishes a space in visitors are inspired to long for an encounter God's with inexpressible presence.

The incursion, however, goes much further. “Shuttering in” and “disclosure” draw the visitor into this specific space. When the step is taken in the direction of new awareness, stained glass windows can become striking, expressive fragments. Figuration redrafted in ideas can speak with greater clarity and lead our gaze beyond the image. Traditions are thus made available for symbolising reinterpretation: a new reading of a compression of meaning that has its roots in the past. Through disclosure, images are plucked from the process of inner vigour that inspired those who designed them, transcending their dilapidated, spent, isolated objective form. They are lifted beyond the walls that surround them and introduced into a non-figurative environment, acquiring a pivotal status in our hesitant confession of contemporary faith. These are also images of social engagement, of constant dedication, of friendship and love. They bear witness at one and the same time to the power of thought and the art of living.

3. Raised to Life: Mark 16,1-8

“When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, to that they might go and anoint him.

And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb.

They had been saying to one another: ‘Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?’

When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back.

As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed.

But he said to them: ‘Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.’

So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

4. The Heavy Stone that was Rolled Away

Undetermined Space

The open white space is unable to tolerate the presence of permanent, stable elements or artefacts. The space breathes receptivity towards the unexpected voice that speaks within the visitor. The sacral quality of the space is available to the impermanent, to what does not graft itself permanently, but partakes in a dynamic movement. To this end, interior attention is of inestimable value.

The disclosure of the apse confronts the visitor with the key to the interwoven complex of silent emptiness and tradition: a black-grey space with a black marble altar at the rear, a tabernacle with pictographic evocations of the Eucharist. Three stained glass above the altar represent the crucifixion with Mary and John as unmistakable witnesses to the “revelation” announcing itself in the life of this innocent victim of the cross.

A large black stone has been erected in the dark space. It evokes the “stone rolled away” from Jesus’ tomb. The lighting emphasises the emptiness beside it. The tomb after all is empty. The women had apparently reported to the wrong place. They were immediately confronted with the absence of the human being Jesus as they had known him. They expected to find his lifeless body and to complete the rituals surrounding his burial. Their experience turned out to be an unexpected yet decisive crossroads in their already far-reaching engagement as Jesus’ disciples.

The “stone rolled away” establishes the contrast between the stone as supposed barrier, securing and definitively sealing death – it is over, they have been robbed forever of an expectation – and the empty space where he is no longer to be found, from where they are directed elsewhere: ‘He has been raised... he is going ahead of you. An incomprehensible mystery makes the flee the place. The ‘relocated’ stone frustrates every logical order.

The Other Place

It is here that we find the symbolism behind the chapel’s renovation. Faithful to their tradition, people tend to visit churches in the conviction that the God they desire to worship in them will be recognisably present in an architectural form, in images and artefacts, in rites and customs. But for many today this is no longer what they seek: it is over, the religious ballast is to a large extent useless, if not inappropriate. A cherished hope is left unfulfilled. Was it the appropriate expectation?

The stipulation of time at the beginning of the Markan narrative 'When the Sabbath was over, ... very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen' (Mk 16,1-2) suggests a new, different morning that does not belong to the familiar temporal order. The 'stone rolled away' elicits a new consciousness, a new empathy for Jesus' life and his deeds. This confrontation led the visitors to the tomb to continue their lives with Jesus and in Jesus. He now becomes the absent yet present one.

The visitor is advised not to pass the 'stone rolled away', the discloser par excellence, without pausing for thought. It is the cornerstone in the reconstruction of the Jesus narrative from the perspective of faith. With the return to Galilee, the story begins again on the other side of the tomb.

When the chapel is completely shuttered, the ceramic chandelier sheds soft discrete light on the white sand. Nothing is illuminated; only the undemarcated, formless, receptive white sand cherishes the shaft of light. Light is present but intangible, unreachable. The disclosure of the apse establishes a link with the light from the chandelier, the crucifixion and being raised to new life. The absent-present one cannot be 'touched'. An inner demand is created, rooted in our deepest interior attention.

The true life of the Risen One is apparent primarily in those believers who come together to remember him, those who feel themselves connected to him in liturgical ritual. Here we find the power of this new life, the new morning surrounded by new people in a distressed world.

A Sound of Sheer Silence

Just as the intangible beam of light in the chapel stirs our attention, Elijah was also invited to attune himself to the barely perceptible breeze in order to sense the presence of God light (1 Kgs 19,12-13). In a cave on Mount Horeb, fleeing the forces of Queen Jezebel, Elijah experiences the mysterious presence of God in the 'whisper of a gentle breeze' or more accurately translated: 'a sound of sheer silence'. This divine manifestation is striking and unique in the biblical tradition. Elijah did not experience God in the usual phenomena, in storm, earthquake and fire.

When he heard the 'sound of sheer silence' he covered his face with his mantle, went outside and stood at the entrance of the cave. The silence in which Elijah was engulfed has two sides. From God's perspective it is space in which he reveals his presence; from Elijah's perspective it is a precondition for observing the Unnameable.

The silence of the One appeals to the silence of the other as Voice and counter-voice, as Call and response. This experience appears to have been a turning point and a breaking point in Elijah's life. The future breaks open for the persecuted prophet. He transcends the narrowness of fear and in the heart of the silence he hears the command not to be afraid, but to retrace his footsteps and make decisions that are to have radical religio-political consequences.

From the empty cave and the indefinable gentle breeze to the arrangement of a silent white space. Education also requires an 'alternative' space in which the gospel's new morning acquires shape.

5. Lasallian Schools as "White Spaces"

At the end of the 17th century, De La Salle and his teacher-brothers committed themselves to liberating the children of the poor from the deadly vicious circle in which they found themselves. Their initiative stood in sharp contrast to the established educational systems. Profit, positions of power, and personal interests were often the primary factors involved in deciding who was to receive and education and to what end. The children of penniless day labourers and unprotected craftsmen were given little if any opportunity to enjoy its benefits.

In the interests of the children under their care, the brothers refused to cling to their own lives and their own interests. Their availability was free of charge, devoid of personal profit, and for life. They experiences welcoming the children of the powerless as welcoming Christ himself. Once again a new morning emerged, and a discrete light was cast on the white sand, the legitimate aspirations of the young.

In fact, the brothers established a silent white space. The genuine interests of the concrete person of the child and of young people took centre stage; unambiguous, and without pretence. Rooted in an open perspective on social reality, new opportunities arose for young people and they were encouraged to take responsibility for the development of their own lives. In this silent white space, the intentions and motivations behind the brothers' availability were purified. The heavy stone of social adversity was rolled away. This is what they had read in the gospel, and it became their rule of life to offer worthy and authentic education.

"Truly I tell you: unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it..." (Jn 12, 24-25).

Since the end of the 17th century, many generations in every continent have been inspired by this courageous deed and have dared to establish a white space. When faced with a world population of seven billion, it remains a perilous undertaking for schools to keep alive the authentic circumstances of the evangelical morning.

The interior of the renovated chapel is a place in which the authentic circumstances and justification of an educational system inspired by Christianity can be studied unimpeded. What interests need to be accounted for in an affluent society to ensure quality of life for all? There are still grains of wheat today that die by force of circumstances, choked by sheer powerlessness. They do not have new life to look forward to; their fate rather is to be sacrificed to the gods of property and affluence, exploitation and corruption.

The dying grain of sand to which the gospel alludes is at the service of new life, grafted to the life of the Risen One.

“It is your specific task to educate the children of the poor; and as a consequence to treat them with exceptional tenderness, to exert yourself for their spiritual development, and to approach them as children united with Jesus Christ, as his beloved. The faith that inspires you must prompt you to venerate Jesus Christ in their person, to chose them above the wealthy of this world, for they are living images of Jesus Christ, our divine Teacher”. (J.-B. De La Salle).