

* So, heavy use of diagrams. 6. Ordained 41 years ago this month (Dec/81), I have been and am a spokesman for (one way to put it) devout-compassionate intelligence. I cannot but applaud when an event such as the St. Bart's battle gives occasion for those who are spokesmen for the poor (chiefly, here, Bill Webber).

The "again" of the title refers to the '60s' battle in connection with another Episcopal church, also in NYC: should the diocese continue building the Cathedral of St. Jn. the Divine or defer the project till "normal" (read, "nonmovement") times? Against me, my friend and colleague Clyde Reid argued against continuing; I argued (1) that \$ you can get for churchbuilding you can't get for the poor or for liberation movements (and, it eventuated, millions pledged to the building were withdrawn in protest against the decision to defer building), (2) that the symbolic value of continuing the building was more + than -, (3) that the plan to train and employ minority workers would have to be deferred, too, if the building process were deferred.... "The [current] Battle of St. Bart's" (Ken Woodward with Eloise Salholz, 60 NW 28 Dec 81) is more difficult for me, and here's why:

1. Sect. of the Int. Watts (urp!) is currently preaching his doctrine that all space is up for commercial grabs, the Grand Tetons as well as Park Avenue. From the commercial standpoint, the National Parks and virtually all church-synagogue properties are "useless." I'd like to see St. Bart's whole site remain useless (no offense to the staff: I've recently been invited to teach there!). This argument is purely, and soundly, negative. (In my TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF LEISURE [1965], I dealt with the importance of uselessness.)
2. Something on the positive side: The great arch.critic Ada Louise Huxtable points to the monument/museum value: "Only in a culture where commercial values have vanquished spiritual values would such a church and its setting not be considered a legacy beyond price from the past to the present." For her (and me), "and its setting" is crucial. To feel this, imagine this bldg. complex as sculpture: all the "empty" space is what's left from cutting away a solid plinth covering the entire site straight up past the surrounding skyscrapers. And hear Woodward: "one of the last oases of light and space amid Park Avenue's towering temples of commerce." Now imagine the bldg. complex as altar and the surrounding skyscrapers as the sides of an open-sky cathedral.... Now meditate on my maxim that "Religious architecture is space shaped in the interest of spirit; a motionless reminder of transcendence in the midst of dailiness; a single frame in the film of eternity's ritual on the stage of time; a perpetual silent invitation to claim and use the inner soul-space for which this type of architecture is a metaphor; and a gathering place for celebrating the Beyond which, while within, remains every beyond."
3. Suppose St. Bart's were to sell only the sky above it, giving the money "to the poor": would that please Jesus? St. Peter's Lutheran did something like that, and Jesus isn't pleased that that Manhattan church could not exist without an annual handout from the bank above (and on two sides) of it. It wasn't Peter or James or John--or Jesus--who thought the money uselessly spent on perfume should have been given to the poor: it was Judas.
4. In witnessing, I've often asked "What did you first dream of becoming in life?" Me, an architect; *and the Lord has now led me, or at least permitted me, to build a beautiful church and a beautiful home. Naturally, I don't take kindly to the badmouthing of architecture vis-a-vis other interests. So, if you must, use this prejudice (i.e., predisposition) to discount this thinksheet.
5. Jesus used religious architecture (temple, synagogue), saying nothing against it but insisting on its proper use ("house of prayer") and weeping over its ruin ("not one stone"). Christianity never was a buildingless religion, even in its dominantly house-church period (which led on to the modified basilica, then the abbey church, then the cathedral, then the parish church, then the congregational church--without ever entirely giving up the house-church).
5. While church-building-and-maintenance motives are mixed, so are those of "mission" and "service." We have here, then, in Woodward's true words, "a dispute over how man can best serve God."

10/12

values, clash

Democrat
St. Bart's
- must of to
church

"What is the...
by... to the...?"

RELIGION

The Battle of St. Bart's

St. Bart's
[unclear]

With its majestic Byzantine dome, luminous stained-glass windows and lush pocket garden, St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church is a magnificent New York City landmark, one of the last oases of light and space amid Park Avenue's towering temples of commerce. That oasis, however, happens to be among the most valuable pieces of commercially undeveloped property in the world—and in October St. Bart's announced that British real-estate developer Howard Ronson had offered it \$500 million for the right to raze its adjoining parish house and build a 59-story office building in its place. The lucrative proposition delighted the church vestry, but it appalled some parishioners—as well as an impressive assortment of city cultural leaders. The result has been an acrimonious debate over God's rights vs. Mammon's.

Last week, after a bitterly disputed campaign, the church's congregation voted—by a surprisingly narrow margin—to accept Ronson's offer. Feelings ran so high that the ballot was supervised by a court-appointed referee as representatives of both sides looked on. And the controversy is bound to continue since the church still must win the approval of the Episcopal bishop of New York, Paul Moore, as well as a number of city agencies, including the City Planning Commission and the Landmarks Preservation Commission. "This is just the first battle," vowed parishioner J. Sinclair Armstrong, a former chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission who now heads the 300-member Committee to Oppose the Sale of St. Bartholomew's Church. "We're prepared to fight it all the way to the Supreme Court."

Spiritual: To church officials and a majority of the parishioners, Ronson's offer is pure manna. Although St. Bart's has a \$12.5 million endowment, Rector Thomas Bowers insists that the church's financial future is anything but secure. Collections are down, he says, and the church needs \$7.5 million worth of repairs and capital improvements; without a new infusion of funds, he adds, the posh parish will be broke within a decade. But the real issue, Bowers argues, is spiritual. The real-estate deal, he says, could revitalize St. Bart's mission as a church by providing it with the means to spend millions of dollars on programs for New York's poor. Opponents

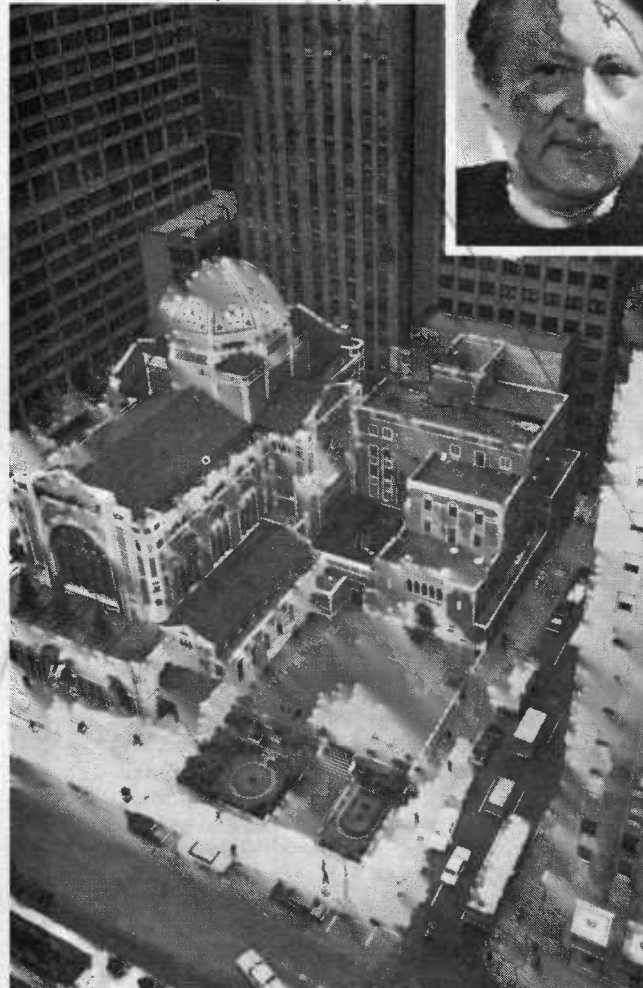
of the sale, Bowers charges, are wealthy reactionaries who "like to think of the church as a social club, as another 'right' membership for the socially elite."

The opposition rejects such talk, and complains that Bowers has tried to railroad the deal through. Last month a New York Supreme Court justice agreed. Accusing the St. Bart's leadership of "steamroller tactics [that] would make the seasoned veterans of old Tammany Hall blush," Justice Edward J. Greenfield forced Bowers to postpone the parish referendum, originally scheduled for mid-November, until last week. He also dismissed the church's argument that the state was interfering in "spiritual" church matters. "Nothing could be more temporal and of this world," Greenfield ruled, "than a proposed multimillion-dollar sale of a valuable parcel of New York realty."

At bottom, those against the sale complain that Bowers is ignoring his midtown flock in the name of serving a larger and needier public. At a recent rally many of the

St. Bart's, Bowers: An acrimonious debate over God's rights vs. Mammon's

Photos by Robert R. McElroy—NEWSWEEK



Many in New York's religious community have little sympathy for such arguments. "I'm tired of big, lovely New York City buildings that are like Shinto shrines," says Dean George W. Webber of New York Theological Seminary. "People go to them out of their respect for their ancestors. Christians are living in a modern Babylon. At the moment, St. Bart's is a moral symbol of the wrong kind." Adds the Rev. Donald Shriver, president of Union Theological Seminary: "The test of Christian authenticity is not the preservation of buildings, but mission. If you test the proposal against Biblical tradition, it is clear that the people are more important than the building."

There is, of course, a case to be made for the notion that the exceptional architectural beauty of St. Bart's itself provides no small measure of spiritual sustenance to New Yorkers. "Only in a culture where commercial values have vanquished spiritual values would such a church and its setting not be considered a legacy beyond price from the past to the present," argues New York Times architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable. The debate over St. Bart's comes down, in the end, to a dispute over how man can best serve God.

KENNETH L. WOODWARD with ELOISE SALHOLZ in New York

... not to bid you...
High...