

# Supreme Pastor of the Church Cares for the Hungarian Church: Church Architecture of the Hungarian Church During the First Decade of John Paul II's Papacy

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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## Abstract

*One of the first longer letters of Pope John Paul II was addressed to the Hungarian Episcopacy and the Hungarian Catholics. Besides the traditional Polish-Hungarian friendship, he highlighted the person of Saint Stephen and the role of Hungary in the history of the Christian religion. “ [...] the Catholic Church, which had such a significant role in the history of Hungary, can still pervade the spiritual image of your country, and can make the lightness of Jesus Christ's gospel, that gave light to the sons of the Hungarian people during so many centuries, shine for your sons and daughters.”- wrote in his letter.*

## Keywords

*space concept, centre of the community, centralised plan, diagonal plan, auditorium plan*

## 1 Introduction

In the early 1960s – with the spirit of openness that also resulted in the Second Vatican Council – the Apostolic See tried to make connections with the East-Central European countries. (Luxmoore and Babiuch, 1999; Berglund and Porter-Szücs, 2010) The socialist states, even within set limits, reacted acceptingly to the approach. Although the openness eased to organise the Church and broke the silence strained for about one and a half decades between the state and Church, the Holy See failed to create an opportunity for dialogue at this point. The state still held the Hungarian Catholic Church's affairs under strict control and management. The first significant step towards agreement was that the Hungarian State gave permission for a greater number of delegates to participate in the Second Vatican Council starting from the second session; the general amnesty of 1963 partly remedied the former personal offences, and in 1964 a partial agreement was reached. (Nagy and Zombori, 2014) The representative manifestation of the official process of making contact was in 1977; Pope Paul VI received János Kádár, Secretary General of the Party, for a private interview at the Vatican. (Fiamová and Jakubčín, 2010) Hope for real change was brought to the countries of the Socialist Block through the election of John Paul II as pope. The Pope sought a solution for the problem, taking the Polish conflicts as a starting point. He saw that such a Church could withstand the atheist socialist state, which was based on traditional grounds, and take the social challenges of the age into account at the same time.

## 2 Pope John Paul II's connection with the Hungarian Catholic Church

One of the first longer letters of Pope John Paul II was addressed to the Hungarian Episcopacy and the Hungarian Catholics. Besides the traditional Polish-Hungarian friendship, he highlighted the person of Saint Stephen and the role of Hungary in the history of Christian religion. “[...] the Catholic Church, which had such a significant role in the history of Hungary, can still pervade the spiritual image of your country, and can make the lightness of Jesus Christ's gospel, that gave light

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to the sons of the Hungarian people during so many centuries, shine for your sons and daughters.” - wrote the pope. (Pope John Paul II, 1978) This was soon followed by further gestures. In his letters to the episcopacy, but mainly to the faithful, he acknowledged the work of the Hungarian Church and the work in the field of religious education. He also gave methodological advice to the Hungarian Church and paid great attention to the celebrations of Hungarian Saints. In his letter commemorating the martyrdom of Saint Gerard, he encouraged the Christian Hungarians with these words: “The statue of Saint Gerard, monk, apostle and martyr, stands in the middle of your capital, above the Danube, and with his cross raised high he is still calling for this: Be the evidence of faith in Christ and Christianity, brotherly love among your own people.” (Gergely, 1991)

It was an important moment in the life of the Hungarian Catholic Church when, on 8th October 1980, Pope John Paul II consecrated the Chapel of Patrona Hungarie in the crypt of Saint Peter’s Basilica. Here, also can be found the works of famous Hungarian artists and sculptors. An event of even deeper significance occurred in 1988: on the 950th anniversary of the death of King Saint Stephen, founder of the state, Cardinal Primate László Paskai solemnly invited Pope John Paul II to Hungary; although, the long-planned visit took place only after the change of regime.<sup>1</sup>

Pope John Paul II considered the pastoral nature of the Second Vatican Council, the freshening of Christian spirituality, important. (Weigel, 2005) He fulfilled the reforms in the spirit of openness and progress. He consciously and consequently represented the need for changing the image of the Church through the renewal of the liturgical space. Due to his persistent work, the Hungarian Church renewed the internal arrangement of its churches, and the application of new space concepts gained ground in case of newly established churches.

### 3 New arrangement types for Hungarian churches

The most decisive question of spatial organisation was, in accordance with the spatial conditions, the emplacement of the altar in the space, but most of all, with the seating position of the faithful. Reforms of the Second Vatican Council emphasised the central position of the altar.<sup>2</sup> (MALEZI, 2009) This centre is primarily visual, the centre of the community of the faithful and the priest. The alternatives for positioning the community resulted in different centres, thus different spatial uses (Fig. 1). In comparison with the traditional longitudinal arrangements, solutions organised around a central point also appear in Hungary.

<sup>1</sup> Pope John Paul II visited Hungary twice: 16-20 August 1991 and 6-7 September 1996.

<sup>2</sup> The exhortations of the arrangement of churches: *Roman Missal general provisions*, Chapter V.

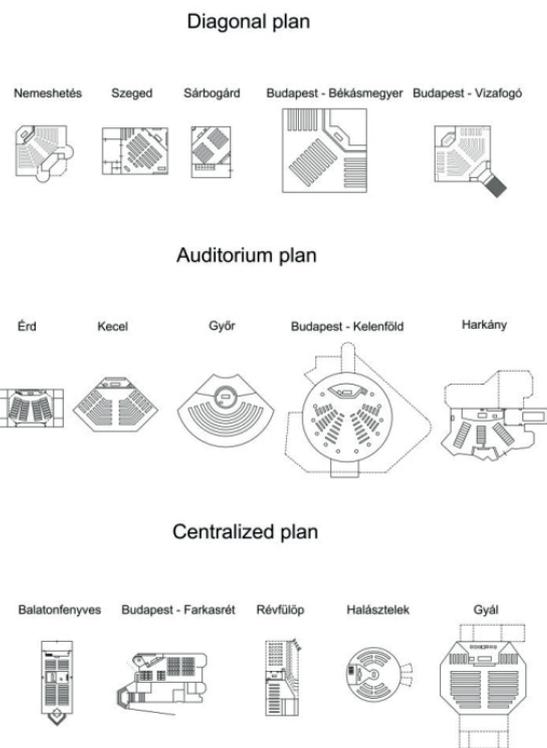


Fig. 1 Space concepts from the Hungarian church architecture of the 70s-80s.

A few progressive creations had already appeared in the early 70s. Turning the altar space into a diagonal direction inside the liturgical space of István Szabó’s church in Farkasrét is a transition between the traditional and the centre-forming arrangements. (Levárdy, 1982) A mature example for diagonal layout is the church of Nemeshetés. This was built from the plans of Ferenc Török, who found solutions meeting the new liturgical needs much earlier compared to his contemporaries. The axial design of the church space - from the arrival to the altar, and further to the crucifix - happens along a square diagonal; disrupting the static feature created by the square form and keeping the typical axiality of Christian liturgy (Fig. 2). This concept is one of the new arrangement types appearing at the end of the 70s, but mainly in the 80s.

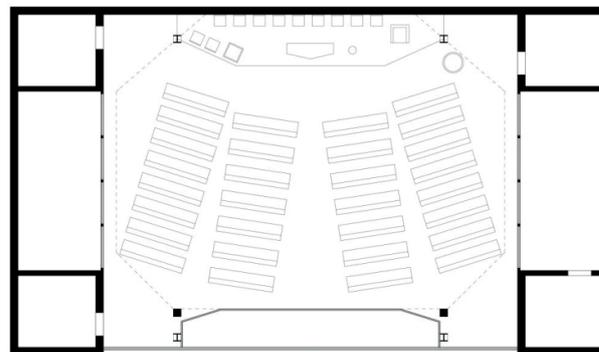


Fig. 2 Nemeshetés: the diagonally arranged interior of the Church of Holy Spirit (1976).

The Church of Saint Joseph the Worker, linked with the name of Ferenc Török who worked on the renewal of liturgical space, is located in Révfülöp, a settlement at Lake Balaton. The number of church constructions increased at weekend resorts in the neighbourhood of Lake Balaton - the most important holiday resort in the 70s and 80s - due to the compulsory Sunday morning mass introduced at the Council. The church of Révfülöp serves as an example for this. The church built between 1978-82 has a uniquely arranged floor plan. The interesting thing about the building, of a traditional arrangement, is the periodically variable use of space. During the summer season, a bilateral use of space is created by opening the glass wall behind the altar table, integrating the benches in front of the building to the liturgical space (Fig. 3).



**Fig. 3** Révfülöp: outdoor mass of the Church of Saint Joseph the Worker (1978-82).



**Fig. 4** Érdliget: floor plan of the Church of the Assumption (1978-83).



**Fig. 5** Érdliget: altar table at the radially arranged church space of the Church of the Assumption (1978-83).

A new concept in the period following the liturgical revival is the radial arrangement. The benches radially arranged around the altar space unequivocally direct the attention to the altar and the ambo. The shape of the building often aligns to the layout, which results in a fan-shaped floor plan. The church of Érdliget, designed by István Szabó in 1978, also shows this radial arrangement. The liturgical space, furnished in a rectangular form, can be expanded by opening the side rooms (Fig. 4). The designer emphasises the altar table placed at the centre of the community not only with the arrangement of the benches but also with the floor tiling plan that also runs radially from the edges of the building to the stipes of the altar table (Fig. 5).

The diagonal arrangement of the Nemeszetés church, mentioned above, also appears in the 80s. Besides the simple design - benches placed perpendicularly to the diagonal axis - the radial layout also appears within the diagonal design, to realise a space more suitable for masses. This form is shown by the Church of Saint Martin of Tours and Saint Nicholas of Flüe in Budapest, designed by István Szabó and Pál Borsányi (Fig. 6). It is symmetrically designed along the diagonal axis of the square-shaped floor plan. The symbol of the community sitting around the table is further strengthened by turning the benches slightly around the altar (Fig. 7).



**Fig. 6** Budapest-Vizafogó: interior of the Church of Saint Martin of Tours and Saint Nicholas of Flüe (1985-86).

The symbol, highlighted by the Conciliar reforms, the festive nature of the Holy Communion, and the centre set altar table proposed experimentation with the central form in Catholic church architecture. The only example for this is the Church of Saint Elisabeth in Halásztelek, built following the designs of Csete György in 1982. The centrally arranged building has a circular floor plan (Fig. 8). The skylight on the top of the hemispherical dome is the only source of natural light that illuminates the circular-shaped altar table from above. The mass of the building is reminiscent of ancient Hungarian forms, while the stylised rose formed by the wooden structure alludes to Saint Elisabeth's legend (Fig. 9).

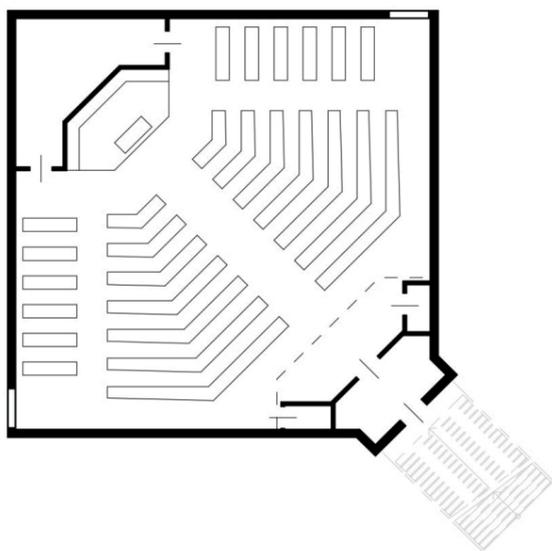


Fig. 7 Budapest-Vizafogó: floor plan of the Church of Saint Martin of Tours and Saint Nicholas of Flüe (1985-86).

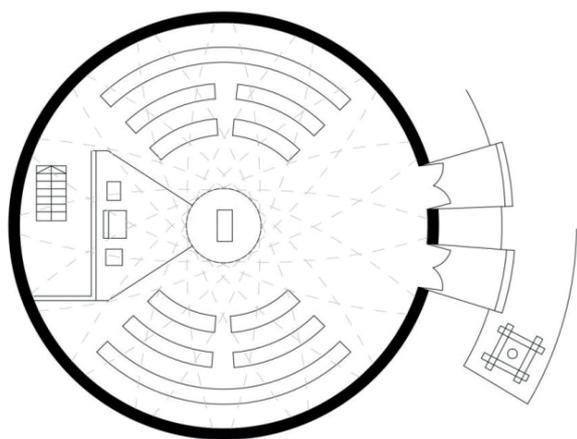


Fig. 8 Halásztelek: floor plan of the Church of Saint Elisabeth (1982).

Although the reforms emphasise the central position of the altar, they also clarify that this does not necessarily mean a central form. The central role is primarily visual, theoretical, or, even more specifically, symbolic. The centre-forming arrangement seeks a solution for this. Though the church of Gyál, designed by Dénes Perczel in 1983, is central, it has an

octagonal floor plan, but by dislocating the altar space from the geometrical centre, an axial space organisation evolves. The placement of the seats nicely strengthens the symbol of the congregation gathering around the table: from three sides, the faithful, and from the fourth side, the priests and the assistants create a communion. The light coming from above, which makes the altar space the lightest point of the church interior, enhances the intimacy of the atmosphere so that the faithful can participate in an intimate unity in the Holy Mass (Fig. 10).



Fig. 9 Halásztelek: altar space of the Church of Saint Elisabeth (1982).



Fig. 10 Gyál: altar table in the centre of the community of Church of Saint Stephan the king (1983). (Photo by Lilla Lednecki)

The symbolic use of light is typical for church architecture of this era, but the roof shape and the formulation of roof surfaces can also increase the spirit of the interior. The Church of Saint Ladislaus in Pécs-Postavölgy by József Gettó is formulated in an abstract building mass. (Levárdy, 1982) The voluting floor plan narrows from the entrance, which looks to the valley extending in front of it, and towards the altar space; its liturgical space is radially arranged. The internal height is lowest at the entrance, gradually rising from this point. It reaches its peak at the altar space where the mystery of Transfiguration takes place, where the Encounter occurs (Fig. 11).



**Fig. 11** Pécs: Church of St. Ladislaus (1981).  
(Photo: Zorán Vukoszavlyev's archive.)

#### 4 Conclusion

Due to the Eastern European policy of the Apostolic See, the political pressure exerted on the church by the state eased. This allowed the Hungarian Catholic Church to monitor and engage with the process of renewing the liturgy. The reforms of the Second Vatican Council also had a great impact on church architecture; a new church concept was defined to meet the needs of the modern parishioner. The new tendencies from international practice appeared only delayed in Hungarian Catholic church architecture and were constructed in a far more modest way. The presented innovative concepts of radial, diagonal, and centre-forming arrangements were formulated as a result of the renewed liturgy, while a significant number of the churches built in the 70s and 80s follow the traditional longitudinal arrangement. (Rombold, 1984) Nevertheless, the prominent architects of the era were able to meet the needs of the renewed liturgy shortly after the end of the Second Vatican Council, which is also thanks to Pope John Paul II's loving guidelines and devoted attention towards the Hungarians.<sup>3</sup>

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