

## Minimalistic Mission

by Boris v. Brauchitsch

We, poor sinners, enter the sanctified interiors of Catholicism, those fortresses of a faith that sets great store by liturgical pomp, theological sophistry and decorative refinement. The stone floors gleam, the gold on the walls and ceilings shines. Nothing should suggest that the Church is lacking in means or possibilities. Anyone who comes here to pray knows that he or she is in the care of a power that can grant grace and forgive sin. Yet the spaces we see here are practically empty, we are almost the only ones here and may look around, apparently unimpeded, at the seductive opulence of this architecture and choose for ourselves the perfect place from which to observe it. The whole structure, the whole splendour of the massive coffered ceilings and broad domes is aligned with us, on our ideal position in the middle of the nave, as if all of it were created just to impress us personally.

The photographs of these churches are as objective as possible, indeed they are almost unnaturally and pitilessly objective, for what reigns supreme is absolute stillness and – apart from a few human shadows that scurried past during the long exposures – motionlessness. No element stands out as a result of atmospheric lighting, no lines converge as might be expected given the optics. Nor do these images show crime scenes the way crime scenes are usually shown: with the main focus on the victim or circumstantial evidence, stretched out at random or in a precipitated clutter. There are no visible victims here, and the evidence is the whole space itself.

The photographs which Claus Rottenbacher took between 2009-2011 against the backdrop of the disclosure of numerous cases of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church show interiors, captured emotionlessly with an analogue large-format camera, the precision of which no detail escapes. Indeed, these images actually show more. From eternal damnation, Lord, deliver us. Through your incarnation and your holy suffering, Lord, deliver us. Through your death and resurrection, Lord, deliver us who stand here and wonder in awe. But we are not standing. We are lying – the litany in our minds, as befits a future prostration – flat on the ground. The camera, and so we too, are not at human eye level, the floor is so close to us that it is slightly blurred, while the mighty ceilings swell above us.

Astonishment gives way to submission. This clerical inner life is not designed for flat hierarchies but clearly indicates top and bottom. And the sober numbers which Claus Rottenbacher has selected as titles of these interiors suggest that he does not wish to locate this power principle in some concrete place. His church spaces function instead merely as prestigious representatives.

The ritual of prostration, an extreme western version of the Chinese kowtow, from which Rottenbacher has borrowed the title for his interiors, is a gesture of unconditional surrender to the dominion of another, in this case, a God. In the Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican Churches those who dedicate their lives to him lower themselves in this way before the congregation so as to be raised before a divine eye. The

Church cannot conceive of a real spiritual mission without the feeling of impotence, without surrender. It requires that you abandon yourself unconditionally. In order to convey this subtly, but at second glance all the more strongly, all the discreet minimalist Claus Rottenbacher does is to shift the perspective. In the end, everything is, after all, a question of viewpoint, as we know. And here the viewpoint shows not only that the spaces are orderly, that in the eyes of the Church “everything is in order”, but also that in this institution to walk upright is in no way a matter of course.

Prostratio means not just to throw yourself down, but also to knock down. As for the person lying on the ground, this does not necessarily sound like a voluntary act. Yet the Church understands prostration as a mere declaration of complete trust and true dedication. This form of submissiveness is part of the procedure when priests are being ordained or virgins consecrated, which procedure includes a vow of celibacy – the virgins being consoled by the promise of a mystical union in some uncertain future when Jesus awaits them all. And just as early Christianity, that religion of the underprivileged preaching poverty and brotherly love, has become a global player with inestimable power and enormous wealth, so too has earthly sexuality always played a fatal role that often involves the abuse of trust and dedication. Once you have discovered the standpoint of the photographer and his camera, you can no longer ignore it. Lord, come and deliver us, Lord, hear us, Lord, have mercy, Lord, be so kind as to spare us.