

Tradition in Continuity

Considerations for the Development of Catholic Sacred Architecture



Body and City – Two Paradigms for the Church Building | Posted June 7, 2011

Our church buildings show forth the reality of the Church – and indeed they should – both physically, and symbolically. The buildings that we construct are a visible sign to the world that the Body of Christ is actually present in this very place and time. As such they carry, so to speak, a burden of responsibility for conveying this astounding reality to the broader secular culture.

Given this unavoidable condition, this responsibility, we ought to be very familiar with the most prevalent symbolic meanings that have been ascribed to our church buildings throughout the centuries by the great teachers of the Faith, builders, and architects. We should understand what our buildings ought to convey to the surrounding culture, and why those meanings are important to us as the People of God.

Unfortunately, we as Catholics we have largely cast aside the abundant theological meaning embedded and available within each and every church building. Which is, to state it quite briefly; the church building stands for Us. Our church buildings have always provided a meaningful visible structure with which we can associate the invisible reality of the Church that is in fact built up of its members as living stones.

And over the past two millennia the two most important symbolic understandings of our sacred buildings have been:

- The church building symbolizing the Body of Christ, and
- The church building symbolizing the Heavenly Jerusalem, the City of God.

These two paradigms are so incredibly rich in their theological implications that it would take more than a

lifetime of work for the architect, artist, or artisan to even come close to exhausting their symbolic potential. Here are just a few points for reflection.

The Church, *in her members*, is identified by Jesus himself with his own Body – the same Body that Jesus identifies with the Temple – which was the singular place of the priestly sacrifice, the mercy seat, the place of atonement, and God’s own dwelling with his people on earth. And so when we speak of the church building as signifying the Body of Christ we are drawing upon the entire Temple tradition of the Old Testament, and our understanding of the Church in the New. The “locus” of sacrificial offering has been transformed from the Temple to the very Body of Christ. This Body is now identified with the Church itself, the assembly of God’s chosen people, the royal baptismal priesthood that we all share. Our churches then should strive to make visible this condition of the ordered harmony of parts and the concept of mutual dependence and support that runs through all of St. Paul’s teaching on the ecclesial “body” of believers.

The Church is also identified as the living stones of the New Jerusalem. This is fundamentally an eschatological vision, proposing the fullness of glory that has been ushered in during this Age of the Church, though not yet completed. The reality of this City of God has come to us through the Paschal event of Jesus’ institution of the Eucharist, passion, death, resurrection, and ascension. In scripture we are given several wonderful visions of the New Jerusalem, and they all are described as the dwelling place of God among his People, fully redeemed. This is what our sacred architecture should strive to convey to us as participants in the Liturgy – during which the entire Church, visible and invisible, participates in the *kenosis*, the self-outpouring offering, of Christ to the Father in heaven always-forever. In our churches, in the interior spaces and in the sanctuary in particular, we should convey a sense of

the glory of the Lord, and our hope for his return in glory. Saint Peter describes it as “wonderful light.”

Listen again to his beautiful exhortation from the 2nd Reading of the 5th Sunday of Easter:

Beloved: Come to him, a living stone, rejected by human beings but chosen and precious in the sight of God, and, like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

For it says in Scripture:

Behold, I am laying a stone in Zion,
a cornerstone, chosen and precious,
and whoever believes in it shall not be put to shame.
Therefore, its value is for you who have faith, but for those without faith:

The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone, *and*
A stone that will make people stumble,
and a rock that will make them fall.
They stumble by disobeying the word, as is their destiny.

*You are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood,
a holy nation, a people of his own,*

*so that you may announce the praises” of him
who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*

Both of these paradigms, the Sacrificial Body and the Glorified City of God, should be part of the ongoing conversation between every ecclesiastical architect and every parish building committee. These theological concepts call us to understand a) the abundant symbolic value of our buildings both inside and out, and b) the responsibility that every church has to express the amazing reality of our God who continues to make himself present in time and space – through the Sacraments, the ministerial priesthood, the Word, and in the assembly of the People he has made his own.

Let us endeavor to recapture this symbolic worldview that grasps the beauty and authentic meaning imbued by the Creator in the material world around us, that we would indeed be “brought into his wonderful light” as we are built up into a “spiritual house.” Our sacred buildings should always remind us that we, the Church as the Body of Christ and by his great mercy, have become the new place within which a worthy offering can be made to the Father – for God’s glory and our own sanctification.