

# Tradition in Continuity

*Considerations for the Development of Catholic Sacred Architecture*



## Building Culture | Posted on July 19, 2011

If we desire to know the values of any particular culture, we ought to consider carefully its buildings. And special attention must be paid to those buildings that embody the greatest expenditure of resources; those buildings which were built to last. We can learn much about past civilizations in this manner – think of the Athenians, the Romans, the Mayans, the Egyptians - and in a similar way, we can recognize certain truths about our own contemporary culture. For where we place our treasure, there also shall our hearts be found.

One of the most influential means of embodying, displaying, and thereby communicating the great traditions of civilization has been the built environment. For the past seventeen centuries Christian communities – where they were not thwarted by persecution, as the Catechism notes – have been building structures that well fit this description of celebrated buildings intended to long outlast the life of their patrons. Examples of Christian ecclesiastical architecture are now common in almost every part of the world; and it seems fitting that our enduring sacred buildings should serve as evidence of the longstanding and pervasive importance of communal ritual worship within the broader culture.

Indeed, considering the very word *culture*, Pope Benedict XVI, following the wonderful work of the German Catholic philosopher Joseph Pieper, has shown that without the *cult* of religious belief and practice, there is no real ground or content from which a *culture* can develop. Without religious belief and practice there is, ultimately, very little to hand on or confer upon future generations.

Religious faith is a generative thing. It always seeks to propagate itself through the establishment and development of a living tradition. The very word itself, from the Latin *traditio*, means “to hand on.” And because

(and only when) our religious faith is handed on it remains a “living” tradition. It must pass from one person to another, from one generation to another, and from one place to another. Heart speaks to heart...

The liturgical calendar is a notable example of the generative and formative nature of religious belief and practice acting as leaven within the secular culture. Our great Christian feasts and festivals have largely been adopted and incorporated into the general secular cultures of the entire English, French, and Spanish speaking world. These holy-days now provide the social cadence and rhythm for each year, from Easter, to Christmas, to Mardi Gras, and even All Hallows Eve.

So too our Christian ecclesiastical architecture has been a leaven in our towns and cities – particularly throughout the Western world. Who is not struck with a sense of propriety, of “rightness” as one approaches a small town whose church steeple or bell tower rises above the neighboring rooftops? This is a silent proclamation of the Gospel! It is a statement of belief and a record of history. It is a presentation of the values that undergird the culture - the living tradition – in that place and time. And we clearly understand it as such – so much so that it is often taken for granted.

What we hope for in this day and age is that if we were to worship in that church, below that noble steeple or bell tower, that we would find among our fellow worshippers a vibrant faith, that has been handed down to them, and is being communicated, literally handed on, to those who will grow and flourish even after the lives of those present have run their earthly course.

Likewise, the church buildings we build today serve as a mirror of our own culture and values. They show back

to us – inside and outside the Church – the relative importance that we place upon the things that will endure, and those that will pass away. Our church buildings fall somewhere in between the ends of this spectrum.

Architecture has a quasi-permanent character. It usually outlasts its patrons, designers, and builders. Many of the buildings through which we pass each day were here before we were and will remain standing after we are gone. As such our buildings serve as repositories for our own values – or better, as manifestations of that which we value. Our buildings cannot be only for our own good. They must be for the good of all – now and on into the future. That is why for us today the question of what we will build is a matter of faith, tradition, and responsibility. The question is, “What will we hand on to those who will come after us?”

With regard to Catholic sacred architecture and sacred art, the answer to this question – regarding the legacy of our lives – ought to be the fullness of the faith, whose hallmarks are those of the Lord himself – Goodness, Truth, and Beauty.

Our churches should be **Good** insofar as they enable and encourage the faithful to fulfill our duties toward God in

right worship, and toward our fellow brothers and sisters through Christian charity.

Our churches should be **True** insofar as they present to us in symbol, art, ornament, arrangement, and architecture the revealed and developed truths of the faith handed down to us in this Age of the Church, as we await Christ’s return in Glory.

Our churches should be **Beautiful** insofar as they show forth the Glory of the Lord and the presence of the Living God, through the work of human hands, as they prefigure for us the redemption of all of Creation which we so eagerly anticipate in each liturgical celebration.

If fact, each of these aspects presumes the presence of other two. We might say that Goodness is not fulfilled without Truth and Beauty; nor is Truth fulfilled when Beauty and Goodness are lacking.

Therefore we can rightly claim that Beautiful buildings for Christian worship and the common life of the faithful ought to be considered an essential aspect for the handing on of our vibrant faith tradition and for the renewal of our culture.