

Tradition in Continuity

Considerations for the Development of Catholic Sacred Architecture



The Heavenly City and Beauty in our Time | Posted on April 30, 2011

In previous posts, I have called to our readers' attention the laudable work of Dr. Denis McNamara, who serves as the assistant director of the Liturgical Institute of the University of Saint Mary of the Lake in Mundelein, Illinois. Dr. McNamara is an architectural historian whose work on the recovery of sacred architecture in service to the Liturgy is a great benefit to the Church.

I was very pleased to receive in the mail yesterday, as a gift from a new acquaintance, Dr. McNamara's 2005 book [Heavenly City: The Architectural Tradition of Catholic Chicago](#). Simply stated, the book, with lavish photography by James Morris, is an architectural delight. It will no doubt be well used as part of our reference library for the ecclesiastical design work that we assist with at Integration Design Group. It will take its place alongside Dr. McNamara's other highly acclaimed work, [Catholic Church Architecture and the Spirit of the Liturgy](#) from 2009.

In reviewing the pages of *Heavenly City* - each bearing beautiful images and engaging historical, theological and liturgical text - I was struck by an all too familiar set of mixed emotions. For when one encounters such examples of truly beautiful sacred architecture a sense of gratitude and joy is the first and most natural response. However the joy one feels is colored, if not at times surpassed by the sense of loss. And here is where we must guard against slipping into nostalgia.

For the examples presented in *Heavenly City* are of course not recent or new. Rather they span more than a century and a half of wonderful church building up until the crescendo of high modernism in the postwar years. These years were of course also marked by the reform of liturgical ritual, devotional practices, and decorative sensibilities that was ushered in following the Second Vatican Council. In fact the latest churches noted in the book were completed in 1950 and 1962, and are

themselves worthy examples of this transitional period - prior to the Council - when the manner of stylistic expression showed evidence of simplification and streamlining, while the symbolic content and theological richness - which is to say the 'sacramental nature' - of the church building remained very much intact and legible.

And so in *Heavenly City* we are presented with a great testimony to the confidence, trust, hope and faith of the many many Catholics - lay, clergy, and religious - who committed themselves and their treasures to building up the House of God on earth. For this we cannot but give joyful thanks. Their legacy stands as a witness to the power of our buildings to edify us, to build us up as the Body of Christ on earth, to represent to the world the People of God gathered together in a particular place, and to convey in some limited way the Glory of the Lord in his dwelling.

But quickly upon the heels of this great appreciation come the uncomfortable questions: What about now, in our own time? What do we lack - both personally and communally - that would make possible the construction of such noble buildings for our own communities of faith? Why are such and similar church buildings deemed beyond reach for us? - though we are only two and three generations removed from these venerable examples? Why do we, the lay faithful, who are more prosperous than in generations past, continue to settle for less-than-beautiful churches?

It is easier of course to simply raise such questions than it is to answer them. But the examples gathered up by Dr. McNamara, when set beside our contemporary church buildings, they *themselves* call out for some response. And so I'll offer a few, albeit too-brief, suggestions.

SACRAMENTAL WORLDVIEW: We have lost, or forgotten, or not been instructed in a full and rich sacramental theology. We do not believe (or we act as

though we do not believe) that “matter truly matters!” The material of creation conveys truths about the Creator; truths we long to know, for they reveal to us a great deal about ourselves and our relationship with the Lord. In fact, God has given to man the goods of this world, and intends that they become a way for us to make a return to Him. This is especially true in this Age of the Church, between Pentecost and the Coming of Christ in glory. Creation is in the process of constantly being redeemed in Christ, and our church buildings should offer us some foretaste of the fullness of this redemption – a fullness toward which we are indeed journeying.

Dr. McNamara has much to offer in this regard in *Catholic Church Architecture*; in which he encourages the Church to recover the profound sense of “anticipatory eschatology” as the proper *function* of the structure, ornament, and decoration of our sacred buildings.

BEAUTY: In a closely related aspect, we are no longer comfortable, or perhaps no longer capable of speaking about Beauty, except in the most mundane and relativistic manner related to ‘taste’ or personal opinion. In fact Beauty is one of the three transcendental aspects of the Triune God – the aspect that shows forth the Splendor of Truth and the Goodness of the created order. But we have fallen into the materialist trap; believing that the things of this world are merely things, and have no real metaphysical importance or value to our own spiritual life, to our conversation with God. It is a self-entangled, nihilistic and utilitarian argument – that matter is all there is, so ultimately matter does not really matter, thus do with it whatever you will.

ROOTS: We are a transient people – especially we suburbanites. We no longer expect that our daughters will

enter into marriage in the same church in which they are raised. They might have relocated to another city, and we might have well. (*As an aside - indeed we might not want them to marry in our suburban parish church... Send them downtown to the beautiful old cathedral instead!*)

The point being that our roots are not very deep, and so our desire to pour out our blessings into a longstanding legacy of built theology has been truncated. We now need to be cajoled into a once-per-decade Capital Campaign just to consider giving a bit more.

A WORTHY OFFERING: Speaking of giving, we are terribly deficient. To put it succinctly, we fear much. We lack trust in Providence. Adding this to the much looser ties to our parishes mentioned above, and it is easy to see how those immigrant Catholic communities in 1880s Chicago – made up most often of simple laborers - built buildings far more beautiful and enduring than those of our own day and time. We need to recover an ethic of stewardship that recognizes our belongings as properly belonging to the Lord. And every time that we offer those blessings back to the giver of all good gifts He does wonderful things with them; far surpassing those things we could achieve on our own.

But let us take heart, for as we grow in love and appreciation for the Church and the Liturgy, we will grow in our desire to clothe the Sacred Mysteries in the most beautiful of garments, the signs and symbols of Heavenly realities, signaling to the world the tremendous gift of God who himself is present within.

* Saturday 30 April 2011 - Eve of Divine Mercy Sunday *