

# Tradition in Continuity

*Considerations for the Development of Catholic Sacred Architecture*



## Mystagogical Catechesis: Learning to love the Mystery | Posted 15 March 2011

Sometimes all that is necessary is to point our readers in the direction of some wonderful resource or document, and strongly encourage its reading. Such is the case with *Sacramentum Caritatis*; the Post-Synodal Exhortation On the Eucharist as the Source and Summit of the Church's Life and Mission offered by Pope Benedict XVI in 2007.

Every Catholic should read this document, and more than once. Were that the case, the Church, and the lay faithful in particular, would have taken a dramatic leap forward in renewing our appreciation for the celebration of the Mass, and our full, conscious, and fruitful participation in the Liturgy. [more on that below...]

As Architects we hope and trust that our efforts will truly assist in deepening the liturgical life of the faithful in the parishes that we serve. However we are acutely aware of any building's limitations – brick and mortar do not themselves offer worship to the Triune God, persons do. Only the living stones can sing.

Or to take the musical metaphor a bit further, the sacramental building that is the church resembles a noble instrument; an instrument nonetheless, that must await our presence and prayer; which is the ritual action that brings forth its true beauty as it is placed into the service of liturgical worship.

In fact, architectural theorists have often likened architecture to 'frozen music' since it incorporates proportion, harmony, and rhythm, not to mention creativity, artistry, whimsy, scale, balance, etc. But from a more personalist view, I rather prefer the metaphor of a musical instrument awaiting the breath of life – for our buildings only 'come alive' when they are receptive to our presence.

This dynamic is clearly at work in the Liturgy, and the more prepared we are to fully enter into our liturgical celebrations, the more our buildings can speak to us of the [things of heaven](#). For our liturgical celebrations to touch us, and transform our hearts, we must be open, receptive, to the Sacred Mysteries that we celebrate. Which is why I would point us back to [Sacramentum Caritatis](#) - which might be particularly fruitful reading during this Lenten season in which we prepare to celebrate the great memorial of the institution of the Eucharist and then Christ's Paschal Sacrifice in the highest liturgical form at the Easter Vigil.

Considering the document we see a call to "enter into the mystery" and to be formed in such a way that will lead to deeper participation in the celebration. Here is an excerpt from the section on Interior Participation.

*Interior Participation in the Celebration*

### ***Mystagogical catechesis***

*64. The Church's great liturgical tradition teaches us that fruitful participation in the liturgy requires that one be personally conformed to the mystery being celebrated, offering one's life to God in unity with the sacrifice of Christ for the salvation of the whole world. For this reason, the Synod of Bishops asked that the faithful be helped to make their interior dispositions correspond to their gestures and words. Otherwise, however carefully planned and executed our liturgies may be, they would risk falling into a certain ritualism. Hence the need to provide an education in eucharistic faith capable of enabling the faithful to live personally what they celebrate. Given the vital importance of this personal and conscious participatio, what methods of formation are needed? The Synod Fathers unanimously indicated, in this regard, a mystagogical approach to catechesis, which would lead the faithful to understand more deeply the mysteries being celebrated.*

I'll offer three brief but important points, which can be drawn from this passage. The first is that we are called to be "personally conformed to the mystery being celebrated." What is meant by this? No less than we are to be brought up with Christ and share in the eternal offering of the Son to the Father through the Spirit. And we are then called to receive the Holy Spirit as we go out into the world as the Church – which is described in the Catechism as the mystical Kingdom of God among men. This is certainly a profound Trinitarian mystery – the self-offering of the Son to the Father and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit flowing from that offering.

Second is the correspondence of our interior dispositions to our gestures and words. We must avoid empty ritualism, the liturgy must be 'real' for us. A great deal has been written about active participation in the post-conciliar years, but it now seems that we are finally beginning to pursue a fuller understanding of this, to include the interior participation that is more contemplative in nature. (Another post forthcoming in that regard!)

Immediately preceding the section quoted above is this section on authentic participation.

*Actuoso Participatio*

### ***Authentic participation***

*52. The Second Vatican Council rightly emphasized the active, full and fruitful participation of the entire People of God in the eucharistic celebration (155). Certainly, the renewal carried out in these past decades has made considerable progress towards fulfilling the wishes of the Council Fathers. Yet we must not overlook the fact that some misunderstanding has occasionally arisen concerning the precise meaning of this participation. It should be made clear that the word "participation" does not refer to mere external activity during the celebration. In fact, the active participation called for by the Council must be understood in more substantial terms, on the basis of a greater awareness of the mystery being celebrated and its relationship to daily life. The conciliar Constitution Sacrosanctum Concilium encouraged the faithful to take part in the eucharistic liturgy not "as*

*strangers or silent spectators," but as participants "in the sacred action, conscious of what they are doing, actively and devoutly" (156). This exhortation has lost none of its force. . . .*

### ***Personal conditions for an "active participation"***

*55. In their consideration of the 'actuosa participatio' of the faithful in the liturgy, the Synod Fathers also discussed the personal conditions required for fruitful participation on the part of individuals. One of these is certainly the spirit of constant conversion which must mark the lives of all the faithful. Active participation in the eucharistic liturgy can hardly be expected if one approaches it superficially, without an examination of his or her life. This inner disposition can be fostered, for example, by recollection and silence for at least a few moments before the beginning of the liturgy, by fasting and, when necessary, by sacramental confession. A heart reconciled to God makes genuine participation possible. The faithful need to be reminded that there can be no actuosa participatio in the sacred mysteries without an accompanying effort to participate actively in the life of the Church as a whole, including a missionary commitment to bring Christ's love into the life of society.*

Lastly is the emphasis on "mystagogical catechesis" – a phrase to which most Catholics would reply with a quizzical look. But mystagogy is simply learning to love the mystery behind the truth, behind the knowledge, behind the doctrine. It is leading those who have been initiated into a mystery into its deeper meaning and significance for their lives. In the history of the Church it is the term used to refer to the period of continued formation for the new Catechumens, the neophytes newly accepted into the Body of Christ. But is not only for the 'newcomers,' particularly in this time of the New Evangelization – we all need to grow in our appreciation for how the Liturgy changes our lives. In the term "mystagogy" we should understand a call to lifelong learning, or rather lifelong formation in the very life of the Trinity through the liturgical life of the Church and her Sacraments.

We should read this document carefully, and bring the weight of its message with us the next time we celebrate Holy Mass!