

# Tradition in Continuity

*Considerations for the Development of Catholic Sacred Architecture*



## Clothing the Treasures of Heaven | Posted on 14 March 2011

A wonderful event took place at the end of April last year; a conference on the development of the living tradition within Catholic sacred architecture. It was wonderful for many reasons, not least of which was the fact that it was sponsored by the academy and held in one of the few Catholic schools of Architecture in the United States.

I'll admit to a bit of pride in the fact that my alma mater, The Catholic University of America, was one of the sponsoring institutions, along with the University of Notre Dame. You can find out more about [the conference here](#).

Suffice it to say that training in the historical development, the style and symbolism, and the sacramental theology that undergirds authentic sacred architecture, be it traditional or contemporary, has long been forgotten in almost every design school. Perhaps not surprisingly, Modernism, post-Modernism, and all measure of contemporary design trends tend to dominate architectural education in our age. All of which deepens our appreciation for this effort by the [Partnership for Catholic Sacred Architecture](#) to bring this conference to life.

Thankfully videos of the conference main presentations have been made available and can be [found here](#).

I bring up this bit of 'news,' now almost ten months hence because I recently came across Cardinal Justin Rigali's wonderful keynote address from this conference reprinted in [The Adoremus Bulletin](#). (Note that the video of the address is available at the page linked above.)

Sometimes of course it is very worthwhile to read or hear a presentation a second time in a different medium. For though I had listened to the address several weeks ago,

when I [read the lecture](#) in printed form recently I was particularly struck by his concluding remarks – some of which are excerpted here.

*Beauty, in its inextricable connection to the true and the good, is the center of gravity of all the liturgical sciences. And this is because the liturgy is foremost the work of the Most Holy Trinity, in which we participate.<sup>52</sup> Beauty changes us. It disposes us to the transforming action of God and thus is one of the principal protagonists of advancing the universal call to holiness.<sup>53</sup> Fascination with the sacred frees us from fixation on the secular.*

...

*Authentic beauty is immune to age, it is always young, and it can never be contained by a mere title. Beauty attracts us as it charismatically aligns itself in symmetry and proportion, congruent with its primary characteristics of authentic truth and goodness. The durability and permanence of the structures that mark our solemn celebrations draw the eye to hope and lead the heart to reflection.*

...

*Our conversation today serves, in the words of Pope Paul VI, to render "accessible and comprehensible to the minds and hearts of our people the things of the spirit, the invisible, the ineffable, the things of God Himself. And in this activity, you are masters. It is your task, your mission; and your art consists in grasping treasures from the heavenly realm of the spirit and clothing them in words, colors, forms — making them accessible."<sup>71</sup> Together we seek to cultivate a sense of wonder and anticipation and to pursue a strategy of recovery and renewal.*

*Artists and architects are composers who play a unique and irreplaceable role as the narrative of salvation history unfolds. Their talents usher the senses into an experience of the mystery of God. Through maximizing extraordinary gifts of their God-given genius, artists and architects are called to construct and restore an avenue into the luminous depth of God's revelation and convey the continuing presence of the sacred in buildings meant for worship.*

We ought to dwell for a moment on his quote from the Address to Artists by Pope Paul VI in which he describes the task of the artist and architect as “grasping treasures from the heavenly realm of the spirit and clothing them in words, colors, forms — making them accessible... and comprehensible to the minds and hearts of our people.” What a beautiful mission statement for all those involved in the design, craft, and construction of sacred art and architecture.