

Tradition in Continuity

Considerations for the Development of Catholic Sacred Architecture



To Bear the Weight of Mystery | Posted on June 17, 2011

In the context of the sacred liturgy, what should beautiful buildings and artwork “do” for us? How can we understand their “success” or “effectiveness?” Ultimately, our church buildings and sacred art can only be “successful” insofar as they lead each of us, as part of a worshipping community beyond of our own time and place, and toward the Lord. They should offer a sense of transcendence.

Eleven years ago, the USCCB published a document entitled [Built of Living Stones](#) (BLS) to provide parishes with some theological background and practical guidelines for their building or renovation projects. The document is specifically focused on the integration of art, architecture and liturgy, and it includes a wonderful section on Sacred Art called “Components of True and Worthy Art.” This section emphasizes the importance of this transcendent dimension for everything that is placed in service to the Liturgy. The appropriateness of a work of art or architecture is thus “demonstrated by the work’s ability to bear the weight of mystery, awe, reverence and wonder that the liturgical action expresses.” The section continues: “Art that is used in worship therefore must evoke wonder at its beauty but lead beyond itself to the invisible God.”

I think this is a fair question to ask of our contemporary church buildings and the artwork within – do they bear the weight of the mystery? Or are they too simple, too thin, too abstracted, or too rudimentary? In BLS the Bishops Conference states that the patrimony of Catholic sacred art and architecture should be the criterion for judging new and contemporary works. Asking in short, whether our new work in fact bears the weight of the mystery as well as our works from the past? This is not a question of nostalgia; not at all. Rather it is a question of excellence.

Here is the section in its entirety from BLS. It certainly deserves our reading. Note that I’ve underlined a few key phrases that are particularly meaningful.

Components of True and Worthy Art

§ 146 § *Authentic art is integral to the Church at prayer because these objects and actions are “signs and symbols of the supernatural world” and expressions of the divine presence. While personal tastes will differ, parish committees should utilize the criteria of quality and appropriateness in evaluating art for worship. Quality is perceived only by contemplation, by standing back from things and really trying to see them, trying to let them speak to the beholder. Quality is evident in the honesty and genuineness of the materials that are used, the nobility of the form embodied in them, the love and care that goes into the creation of a work of art, and the personal stamp of the artist whose special gift produces a harmonious whole, a well crafted work*

§ 147 § *Quality art draws the beholder to the Creator, who stands behind the artist sharing his own creative power, for the “divine Artist passes on to the human artist a spark of his own surpassing wisdom.” This is true of music, architecture, sculpture, painting, pottery making, textiles, and furniture making, as well as other art forms that serve the liturgical environment. The integrity and energy of a piece of art, produced individually by the labor of an artist, is always to be preferred above objects that are mass-produced. Similarly, in the construction of new church buildings, there is no standard pattern for church art nor should art and architectural styles from any particular time or culture be imposed arbitrarily upon another community. Nonetheless, the patrimony of sacred art and architecture provides a standard by which a parish can judge the worthiness of contemporary forms and styles.*

§ 148 § *Appropriateness for liturgical action is the other criterion for choosing a work of art for church. The quality of appropriateness is demonstrated by the work’s ability to bear the weight of mystery, awe, reverence, and wonder that the liturgical action expresses and by*

the way it serves and does not interrupt the ritual actions which have their own structure, rhythm and movement. Since art is revelatory, a gift from God, a truly beautiful object stretches “beyond what the senses perceive and, reaching beneath reality’s surface, strives to interpret its hidden mystery.” Nonetheless, there is always the chasm between “the work of [the artist’s] hands” and the “dazzling perfection” glimpsed in God’s creative moment. Art that is used in worship must therefore evoke wonder at its beauty but lead beyond itself to the invisible God. Beautiful, compelling artworks draw the People of God into a deeper awareness of their lives and of their common goals as a Christian community as well as of their roles and responsibilities in the wider world. Art that fulfills these qualities is art worthy of the Christian assembly.

§ 149 § *Worthy art is an essential, integral element in the sacred beauty of a church building. Through skilled use of proportion, shape, color, and design, art unifies and helps to integrate the place of worship with the actions of worship. Artistic creations in the place of worship inspire contemplation and devotion. Sculpture, furnishings, artglass, vesture, paintings, bells, organs, and other musical instruments as well as windows, doors, and every visible and tactile detail of architecture possess the potential to express the wholeness, harmony, and radiance of profound beauty.*

The Artist Within the Christian Community

§ 150 § *When artists are called upon to serve the Christian community, there is an “ethic,” a “spirituality of artistic service.” Breadth of imagination enables artists to communicate deep meaning and powerful religious sentiment with grace and sensitivity. This gift from God is combined with refined educated talents that execute elegantly crafted objects for the good of the community and the glory of God. Like the gift of prophecy, religious imagination is a power through which the Holy Spirit can move and speak. As a result, artists do not always confirm comfortable piety but, like the prophets of old, they may confront God’s People with their faults and sins and they challenge the community’s injustice and lack of love. “Even when they explore the darkest depths of the soul or the most unsettling aspects of evil, artists give voice in a way to the universal desire for redemption.”*

§ 151 § *Artists respond to the demands of art, actualizing in aesthetic form their ideas, feelings, and intentions so that when artists activate their imagination, their intentions and inner life are expressed in their work. In working with a parish, artists will also express the intentions, faith, and life of that community. A truly worthy and beautiful artwork can transform the artist and the community for which it is intended. The dialogue with God that an artwork mediates can persuade and invite; however, it does not force its meanings upon individuals or communities.*

§ 152 § *Artists willing to accept commissions destined for a place of worship must be respectful and supportive of the doctrines, beliefs, and liturgical practices of the Church. They also should be knowledgeable about the traditional iconography and symbolism of Christian art. Artists who are genuinely in search of meaning in their work and in their lives will find a homeland for their souls since, in the realm of Christianity, the most vital personal and social questions are posed. Not only does the Bible provide a rich inventory of themes and ideas, but also artists who have envisioned these stories and images have offered unique perspectives on the heart of revelation itself and “this partnership has been a source of mutual spiritual enrichment.”*

§ 153 § *A commission for a church or for worship affords artists an opportunity to join their creative gifts to those in a long history of artists who have placed their talents at the service of God and who have enriched the Church’s treasury of sacred art and architecture. “All artists who, in view of their talents, desire to serve God’s glory in holy Church should ever bear in mind that they are engaged in a kind of sacred imitation of God the Creator, and are concerned with works destined for use in Catholic worship and for the edification, devotion, and religious instruction of the faithful.”*

§ 154 § *The Church needs art and artists to communicate Christ’s message, and artists need the Church to inspire their investigations of the material world, their own inner lives, and the fabric of the community. ...*