

Tridentine Community News

February 19, 2006

Sacred Architecture

Today we will begin the first of a series of commentaries about the structure of the Tridentine Mass, and the architecture and ceremonies that surround it.

An appropriate place to begin this kind of discussion is to reflect on the architecture that we so know and love in our cluster. Regardless of whether the Tridentine Mass is to your liking or not, you probably wouldn't be attending any Mass in this cluster if you did not appreciate the marvelous sacred architecture on display at our three parishes. These buildings were originally built for the Tridentine Mass, whose clear and consistent manner of celebration supplied the architects with specific needs to be met in their designs.

At least two picture books have been written about Catholic churches in Detroit. One is the well-known coffee table book "Make Straight The Path", with St. Josaphat on the cover. The other is the smaller "Catholic Churches of Detroit" by Archdiocesan archivist Roman Godzak. Both books are filled with impressive photos of churches in our Archdiocese. Few dioceses in North America sport the number of well-preserved historic edifices that ours does. When one contrasts the average historic Detroit church with the typical modern suburban churches being built, it is evident that something inspired the old that is not inspiring the new.

What is that something? The doctrine of our faith has not changed. Rather, architects of the past tended to follow the guidelines of St. Charles Borromeo, whose 1577 text *Instructiones Fabricae et Supellectilis Ecclesiasticae* codified church design after the Council of Trent. St. Charles advocated a specific style of building design that correlated with and focused attention on the sacredness of the actions in Holy Mass. By contrast, many, but not all, current architects seem predominantly concerned with providing

functionality rather than inspiration. Witness the trend towards more attention being given to the design of a "Gathering Space" than to the Stations of the Cross, for example.



Whether in the Tridentine or Novus Ordo versions of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, what is going on at the altar is a magnificent event. Our Lord comes down to earth and transforms ordinary bread and wine into His Most Precious Body and Blood. These sacred actions deserve a setting fitting their solemnity and dignity.

Emphasis on the Vertical

One of the most obvious features of many older churches is their emphasis on the vertical. Even smaller churches maintain a proportion between the height and the width and depth of the building. From the inside, relatively high ceilings help to draw one's mind toward heaven. Paintings and sacred art on the walls and ceilings

draw our eyes upward and lead us to contemplate the things of heaven. The reredos, or back wall of the high altar, is perhaps the most dominant feature of a traditional sanctuary. It, too, draws our eyes upward. Its statues and depictions of sacred symbols remind us that something important is going on below.

From the outside, the height of the church building distinguishes it from the more functional residences, businesses, and schools that surround it. Much as skyscrapers can be awe-inspiring, the vertical dimension of churches helps us to realize that there is something out there bigger than us. Sadly, the average Catholic today is more likely to experience the drama of the vertical in architecture by visiting an atrium hotel like the Dearborn Hyatt Regency than by visiting his local parish.

Verticality is just one of many design elements found in classical church architecture. In future editions, we will examine other architectural features and how they relate to the Mass.