

Tridentine Community News

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Veiling the Sacred – Part 1

One of the more memorable essays about church architecture in recent memory is “Veiling the Mysteries”, by Michael Carey, from the Winter/Spring 2000 issue of *Sacred Architecture* magazine. The author makes the point that traditional church design distinguishes between the sacred and the secular in ways to help our faith. Today’s column will paraphrase his ideas.

Let us start with the premise that in our present state of life on Earth, we are not ready to see God in all His Holy Splendor. In Sacred Scripture, our Heavenly Father did not make personal appearances, but was rather hidden behind a cloud or burning bush. The Beatific Vision, or direct perception of God, is reserved for the souls who have attained Heaven. Yet Our Lord Jesus Christ did deign to come to us under the cloak of human flesh, and He even left us the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist so that we could approach and receive Him in a way that our limited minds and senses can handle.

This is not to say that the Blessed Sacrament is any less holy than our Lord would be face-to-face. We must not give in to the temptation to treat the Sacred Species casually, as simple earthly matter because of its ordinary appearance. For this reason, traditional Catholic church architecture makes a definitive separation between the sacred and the secular, to help us properly reverence God, both in the Blessed Sacrament itself, and in the process which leads to the creation of the Blessed Sacrament, namely Holy Mass. One can think of such architecture as helping to foster a healthy fear of the Lord.

Separation of Nave and Sanctuary

In traditional Catholic teaching, the Mass is primarily a sacrificial action. In recent years, some more liberal theologians have tried to advance the notion of Mass as a communal meal, or a celebration of community. Even if one were to pursue that line of reasoning, one still must

admit that the primary role of the Mass is to recreate the sacrifice of Calvary, as our Lord commanded at the Last Supper.

The ancient Temple in Jerusalem ensconced the Holy of Holies, the Ark of the Covenant, behind a curtain. Only the high priest was allowed to enter in, and even then only once a year, after a rite of purification, for the Yom Kippur atonement ceremonies. Even today, the Greek Orthodox

conduct the most sacred part of their liturgy behind a partition called an iconostasis. In a similar fashion, the communion rail functions as the visible separation between the seating area for the faithful (the nave) and the more sacred place where the Holy Sacrifice takes place (the sanctuary). We humans do benefit from the symbolism that we are creatures of God, and as His

creatures, are relegated outside sacred areas, lest we become presumptuous. Only those directly involved in the sacred actions, namely the sacred ministers, liturgical choir (if present), and altar servers, are permitted inside the sanctuary during the Mass, Benediction, and other liturgical ceremonies.

Altar Veils

From around 300 A.D. to the time of the Council of Trent (1570), old liturgical texts indicate that the altar was enclosed with a curtain during the Preface and Canon (Eucharistic Prayer). Today, we see remnants of this design in the form of baldachinos, or canopy structures over altars; and rood screens (walls) demarcating the separation between nave and sanctuary. As with the Temple in Jerusalem, the idea was that the most sacred actions were to take place in private. After the Council of Trent, at least partially in response to the architectural design criteria published by St. Charles Borromeo, the rood screen evolved into the dual-purpose altar rail we know today.

To be continued next week...

