

Tridentine Community News

June 14, 2009

“They Don’t Build ‘em Like This Any More” ...Or Do They? – Part 1 of 3

First-time visitors to Assumption-Windsor, St. Josaphat, St. Joseph, St. Albertus, and Sweetest Heart of Mary, among other historic churches in our area, often stop in their tracks, gaze around themselves, and utter the phrase that headlines this week’s column. But how true is that statement?

Most of us have seen photos of, or have been to, modern churches that either look like a hotel conference room or something inspired by Star Trek. No need to rehash those images here. Common sense tells us that with all of the modern technology available to assist architects and contractors, we should be able to build more magnificent churches than ever before. So why don’t we?

One answer is financial: The better the edifice, the more it will cost. Commercial lenders value real estate based on its cash flow rather than its fundamental asset value, thus it is harder to finance costlier projects. Fancy retail space that sits empty is worthless in the eye of a lender; less fancy but occupied and profitable space means the mortgage is more likely to be paid. While understandable, this philosophy can give rise to an architectural minimalism. We get generic strip malls in place of grand stores that graced downtowns of the past. Consider the former Wright Kay Jewelers Building on Woodward in downtown Detroit. Few suburban stores are so grand and memorable. Suburban residents become accustomed to generic looks, and thus bland churches don’t seem to be lacking. Why spend more for a higher ceiling? Won’t it just cost more to heat and cool?

A second answer is political: Some Diocesan Building Departments have attempted to block the use of traditional architectural styles. Some parishioners and priests don’t want that look, either, considering it outdated.

A third answer lies in the choice of architects: Certain projects have been awarded to architects who have no background in Catholic church architecture, or who don’t seem to understand how liturgy, the tenets of our faith, and architecture should be intertwined.

Fortunately, there are encouraging signs for the future. The Motu Proprio, *Summórum Pontificum*, presents perhaps the strongest argument in recent years for the use of traditional architectural design elements: A new church should allow for the possibility of celebrating the Extraordinary Form Mass. No longer can a diocesan Building Department logically argue against having a Communion Rail, for example.

Let’s take a look at some impressive projects that have been built in recent years:

The Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in La Crosse, Wisconsin is an example of the kind of neo-traditional design that we can expect to see more of in coming years. Designed by Notre Dame professor of architecture Duncan Stroik and dedicated in July, 2008, it has a freestanding high altar surmounted by a baldachino.

While there are many ceremonial and logistical reasons to prefer a high altar mounted against the back wall of the sanctuary, this is likely a compromise to permit Holy Mass to be celebrated both *ad orientem* and *versus populum*. Like the reredos behind a wall-mounted high altar, a baldachino provides the shrouding of the sacred, and the element of the vertical, so appropriate to reinforcing our experience of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. The tabernacle is directly behind the altar, in the center of the sanctuary, on the back wall. There is a communion rail. A choir loft and pipe organ are in the back of the church. Side altars and traditional confessional boxes line the side walls. Latin inscriptions, murals, and plaster ornamentations are visible high up on the walls and dome.

You know “it” when you see it. The Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe has got “it”. This is a recognizably traditional Catholic church. See the below photo and the architect’s web site at www.stroik.com/portfolio/ourladyofguadalupe for some excellent high-resolution pictures. Photos 5 and 17 are particularly detailed and revelatory.



Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity Chapel at St. Thomas Aquinas College in Santa Paula, California is another Duncan Stroik



design, similar in many ways to his La Crosse project. Dedicated in March, 2009, it is somewhat less ornate than the former. Keep in mind that over the ages, churches were not always opened with all of the decorations in place. Budget and time concerns made it quite common for portions of the design to be added or completed over time.

Stroik has again posted detailed photos on his web site: www.stroik.com/portfolio/ourladyofthemostholylrinity.

Comments? Ideas for a future column? Please e-mail info@windsorlatinmass.org. Previous columns are available at www.windsorlatinmass.org