

Catechism on the Liturgy I,14

f. Putting beauty (formation) into a building.

The qualifications to speak authoritatively on how a church ought to look are daunting. So much knowledge must be understood, compiled, harmonized and adapted practically, that to find a man with such qualifications seems impossible. And yet, God provided His Bride with just such a man. Fourteen years after the Council of Trent, a young archbishop put together specific directives regarding the design of Catholic churches, affirming the authority of tradition. He was an expert in architecture; in liturgy (he was instrumental in the revision of the Roman Pontifical, Missal and Breviary under St. Pius V), an expert in priestly formation (he was instrumental in the decree of 1563 regarding this formation), and expert in Canon Law (he was the Papal Delegate to Italy) and he was an expert in art and music. Wow. If that were not enough, he was extremely well read in the Fathers of the Church, and in the medieval doctors (especially St. Thomas Aquinas), so his ability in dogmatic theology was used frequently at the Council of Trent.

His name is St. Charles Borromeo, and the document he wrote is called *Instructiones Fabricae et Supellectilis Ecclesiasticae* (Instructions on the Building and Furnishing of Churches). He wrote it so that it could be applied to Cathedrals, monasteries or humble parish churches. He understood well why mostly odd numbers should be used (1, 3, 5, 7 – in recognition and honor of the Unity of God, the Holy Trinity, Pentecost, and the Seven Sacraments respectively), so that a composition would always have a clear center. This would result in symmetry (a reflection of divine order). When symmetry could not be achieved, then the right side was favored in keeping with the Mass. So for example, if a church could not afford two bell towers, it could build one tower but it must be on the epistle side of the church. He understood well why and what kinds of

circles, domes or vaults should be used for the ceilings, to reflect the perfection of heaven.

During his time, when Protestants were rejecting the idea that man could encounter the sacred through the senses, St. Charles strove to integrate all the visual arts (like sculpture or stained glass) with the preeminent auditory arts (hearing the text of the Mass, music, the sermon) so that everything was in harmony with and in support of the Sung Mass. He did not favor any particular aesthetic style. The Romanesque, Byzantine, Gothic, Baroque...many styles could be used to achieve this harmony. But note the hierarchy here: First is the Mass, and then come singing, then sermons and instructions, then at the last come statues or paintings.

I won't go into the details of his *Instructions* in any length, especially on those parts which refer to the building of convents or cathedrals, but will simply use the parts which refer to the parish church, and apply them to our situation. Not all of what he teaches is possible for us. For example, he says that the sanctuary should be toward the east and should align with the sunrise at the time of the equinox. This is not possible for us. But many things are, so let us look at these in order, to see what should be done. As you read these qualifications, try to apply his principles to our parish church, and see if we are in conformity to the guidance of this great saint.

1. The building should be so prominent and identifiable with the Catholic Church, as to be unmistakable. St. Charles thought of a church as being a building which any Catholic even from another land would know it as such on sight. He was a proponent of the recognition by Catholics of the Blessed Sacrament such that they could walk or ride by

and tip their hats or make the Sign of the Cross in honor of the Sacrament. Non-Catholics should also be able to identify our churches, in regard to their uniqueness and beauty.

2. The Latin cross or cruciform plan is the preferred configuration of a Catholic Church. It would consist at a minimum of a sanctuary, transepts, and a nave. The main entrance should align axially with the sanctuary. And the sanctuary, if possible, should be contained within a vaulted apse form.

3. The façade should have a distinguishable depth and serve as a transition space into the church. The façade is the most important exterior wall of the church, and should contain all the church's exterior ornamentation and decoration. Narrative visual embellishments normally should not be placed on a church's side or rear elevations. He writes the following: "There is one feature above

all that should be observed in the façade of every church, especially a parish church. In the upper part of the chief doorway on the outside, there should be an image of the most Blessed Virgin Mary, holding her son Jesus in her arms; on the right side there should be the effigy of the saint to whom the church is dedicated, while on the left side an effigy of another saint to whom the people of that parish are particularly devoted." He is writing obviously for the baroque style, but even in the gothic the images are at least to be put over the main door.

a. He states that the façade should have an odd number of doors, and ideally three doors if possible. If not three, then one door.

b. The central doorway should be the largest and have the greatest ornamentation, though the side doors may have ornamentation as well.