

## Catechism on the Liturgy I,16

g. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that "...visible churches are not simply gathering places but signify and make visible the Church living in this place, the dwelling of God with men reconciled and united in Christ. (#1180) You wonder how a building could accomplish that, even given the *Instructions* of St. Charles. But it can, especially if it reflects in stone and wood the Gregorian Rite through three natural laws: Permanence, verticality and iconography.

1. Permanence. In the Mass of the Dedication of a Church, we read in the Tract: "They that trust in the Lord shall be as mount Sion: he shall not be moved for ever that dwelleth in Jerusalem." Just as the sacred liturgy should be permanent (and not subject to change unless for a very grave reason) so the church building ought to be permanent to reflect this. It is done in several ways:

a. Durability. The church ought to be a building that will serve for generations. It should transcend time and culture. In other words, to construct a church according to the latest fad will ensure that the structure will be passé, or obsolete in a few years. It is the same principle with church music, or vestments, etc. When Fr. Skip tries to rap his sermon he'll be a buffoon, not a messenger of the Holy Gospel. As the Sacred Liturgy is durable, so should the church building be durable.

b. Massing. The church ought to be of significant mass, built with solid foundations and thick walls. This is related to durability, and integral to verticality. A good, solid mass of stone helps the value of the church being an icon of Christ. This reflects the solid base of the Sacred Liturgy, the massive prayer of the Roman Canon.

c. Continuity. Just as any change in the Sacred Liturgy should only be done

in continuity with what came before (this is called "organic development"), so the church design should come from what has been done before; what is tried and true. For example, the semicircular arch of Romanesque architecture was handed down from the earliest time of the Church. It reflects perfectly the structure of Gregorian Chant. By this I mean that Chant – when sung properly – does not "hit" the highest notes or lowest notes with volume, but softens and tapers the sound to achieve *melisma* (a Latin word whose root is "honey"). Gothic architecture retains all the qualities of the Romanesque, but adds a soaring verticality. This reflects two things that were occurring in the Church when the Gothic was developed: Devotion to Our Lady, and the growth of polyphony. The Gothic arch then accommodates both the sweetness of Chant and the great soaring melodies and glorious harmonies of polyphony.

2. Verticality. "Glory to God in the *highest...*" The vertical should dominate the horizontal. This reflects the primary purpose of the Church – to get us into heaven. The church building should be like the Elevation of the Host at the Mass.

a. It is not a coincidence that the Epistle for the feast of a Dedication of a Church is taken from the vision of St. John the Evangelist of the heavenly Jerusalem: "In those days I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice from the throne, saying: Behold the tabernacle of God with men, and He will dwell with them." The solid foundation is the main altar and the tabernacle, which in themselves ought to point up to the New Jerusalem.

b. It is the dramatic sense of height that enables a man to look up. If there is no height, there is no physical lifting of the head and the eyes toward heaven. If there is no lifting of the eyes and head, the formation of transcendence in the worshipper is very hard to accomplish. This can be seen also in forms of music which are especially earthbound and stuck in some period of time like the 60's. Therefore everything in the church ought to be firmly rooted *here*, but point to *there* – to what is beyond this world. The altar rails, the Stations of the Cross, the candlesticks...everything should point to heaven.

c. Verticality also forms the worshipper in the recognition that Christ is a King. Our ancestors in the Faith called their great churches *basilicas*, a word which comes from the Greek meaning “a house of the king.”

3. Iconography. This refers to the value of a church building as a “sign” or icon.

a. The church should be something to remind us of the next world. However, “Do not conform yourselves to this age.” (St. Paul) Just as the Mass we celebrate should not be conformed to this

world, so the church building shouldn't either.

b. The building should point beyond itself. It will do so not by graphic art (like clever marquees outside the church which attempt to lure new customers), but by veiling the church with symbols, just like the Mass is veiled in Latin. To this day, people flock to see the cathedrals of Europe not necessarily because they are Catholic, but because they are drawn to the mystery of beauty. Those churches allow one to really think of a different world beyond this one.

c. The Introit of the Mass of the Dedication of a Church begins, “Terrible is this place: it is the house of God, and the gate of heaven; and it shall be called the court of God.” The very appearance of our churches should call this great truth to mind.

So if we follow those three simple laws of church architecture – verticality, permanence, and iconography – we will have a building which will help us go to heaven. As one parishioner put it, after he had seen the Gregorian Rite in our cathedral, “The cathedral was a participant in the liturgy.”