

## Catechism on the Liturgy III, 2

The Old Testament is full of symbolism for what was to be fulfilled in the New Testament. Spiritual regeneration and the Church can be seen in the Ark and the Flood; the bread and wine of the Eucharist can be seen in the Manna and the Stricken Rock; the Old and New Covenants are plain in the story of Sarah and Hagar.

Nature and the Church are the implicit and explicit revelations of God. Artists talk about a trinity of effect in every picture, musicians talk about a trinity of tone in every note; philosophers speak of a trinity of power in every mind, and a trinity of essence in every substance. So there should be no surprise to see the Trinity reflected in nature; from a shamrock to a man having a body, mind and soul. The Resurrection is also all over nature – from the setting and rising sun to springtime – and our Blessed Savior taught that excellent doctrine by referring to a grain of wheat which “...if it die bringeth forth much fruit.”

In music we can see the same principle: Franz Joseph Haydn said the trombone is deep red, the trumpet – scarlet, the clarinet – orange, the oboe – yellow, the bassoon – deep yellow, the flute – sky blue, the diapason – deep blue, the double diapason – purple, the horn – violet, the violin – pink, the viola – rose, the violoncello – red, the double bass – crimson. The symbols hold amazingly in his magnificent work *The Creation*. It starts with a soft-streaming sound from violins; then each instrument is added until the sun appears in its glory. Thus, the expressions of one art may be translated into another. So the Trinity is reflected all over a Catholic church.

Many would like the words of our Lord to be plain, unadorned, simple...such that any man with his Bible can grasp the

meaning. The Bishop's Committee on the Liturgy would like to see the same with the liturgy, or at least they desired this in the past when I was a seminarian. But the words of Christ were in fact parabolic, figurative, descriptive and allegorical, and so the church building ought to imitate her Master.

The parables of the Gospel are a sure source for the origin of Christian symbolism. Tradition has it that when Jesus was once in sight of the Temple, He pointed towards it and uttered those gracious words: “I am the Door.” St. Paul does not hesitate to allegorize the Temple: The Holy of Holies was heaven; the High Priest, Christ; the veil, His flesh, etc. No wonder St. Charles Borromeo insisted on the importance of the doors of the parish church!

Christian architecture has as decided a verticality as pagan architecture had of horizontalism. The movement from the groveling pagan to the aspiring Christian is not an accident. *Ad supernas semper intenti*, said St. Paul, “Always intent on the higher things.”

Church architecture should itself be sacramental, a material fabric which figures the purpose for which it was designed. The distinction between a contemporary church (which might look like a mall or some prop from *Star Wars*) and the traditional church is found neither in an association of ideas or in correctness of detail, nor in mechanical nature or in being picturesque or quaint, but in sacramentality. Remember the definition of a sacrament from the catechism: “A sacrament is an outward sign instituted by Christ to give sanctifying grace.” So the church building should be sacramental, an outward sign of what is really happening inside it, and above all what should be happening in the soul.

Here are some examples:

1. The Holy Trinity is symbolized in many ways, such as the three steps up to the altar from the nave; by the sanctuary, nave and narthex; by having three altars.

2. Spiritual regeneration – an octagon is preferred for the baptistery. St. Ambrose points out that the old creation took seven days, hence the eighth was new. The Resurrection was considered the eighth day. The main symbol used in this sacred octagon is three fishes intertwined in an equilateral triangle, typifying our regeneration in the Trinity. The fish is the emblem of the Christian, who was born again of water.

3. The Atonement – this doctrine results in the cruciform shape of the church. Even the cross embellished with foliage and flowers or jewels, signifies the continual flourishing and increase of that which was planted on Golgotha. The arms on a crucifix are not portrayed according to anatomical or medical exactitude – they are extended straight out to symbolize His embrace of the Passion and death, and His undying love for sinners.

4. The Communion of Saints is expressed in the stained glass, the statues, and the votive lights.

5. Doors – “I am the door” said Christ. If a serpent is used for the door handle, it is symbolic of the passage from St. Marks Gospel, “They shall lay their hands upon serpents and shall not be harmed.” We enter from the West end of the church, signifying that it is by way of the Church Militant that we can hope to enter the Church Triumphant (the East end). The ark is a symbol of the Church, not in its human building or final perishing, but in that it saved souls by water. The gothic doors start somewhat wide, but narrow with successive smaller doors, because Christ said “Straight is the path and narrow the door.” From the door to the main altar, we should see a straight path.

6. Gargoyles – representing evil spirits fleeing from the Holiness of Christ.

Symbolism can be pressed too far however. For example in one parable, there are five virgins with oil inside and five outside. I heard a sermon once which said that this means the number of the damned will be equal to the number of the saved. But this is not the teaching of the Fathers. It’s not that everything has to be a symbol. But everything in the liturgy – and the building which it is in – is in one sense a kind of very serious play.