



REBUILD MY HOUSE

*A Pastor's Guide to
Building or Renovating a Catholic Church*

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AN APOLOGIA FOR BEAUTY

BEAUTY IS AN essential characteristic of a Catholic Church. Over the centuries, beautiful churches were built as a lasting testament to the glory of God. In the past decades, the importance of beauty has been either forgotten or consciously avoided as churches are built and renovated. This has caused great harm to the Church, diminishing the impact, meaning, and sanctity of the Mass.

While the lack of beauty in most contemporary churches has been broadly lamented, there have not been many successful efforts to restore beauty in the Church. Beauty has been marginalized as an expensive luxury, not a vital necessity. As the appreciation of beauty has faded, the ability to achieve it has atrophied, and pastors seeking to build a church are often told that beauty is either not important, cannot be achieved on a limited budget, or that a different definition of beauty is now appropriate. But true beauty can still be achieved by those who can articulate its true nature and defend its necessity in Catholic worship.



Beauty and the Transcendentals

Beauty is a physical incarnation of the transcendentals, the essential and incontrovertible properties of being. Nothing can exist without being *unum*, *bonum*, *verum*, or one, good, and true. In God, the perfection of being, all three reach their perfect form. Man, created in God's image, is drawn by his very nature to the simplest and most flawless form of the transcendentals: to the divine.

Saint John Paul II, in his Letter to Artists, states that, "In a certain sense, beauty is the visible form of the good, just as the good is the metaphysical condition of beauty." Thus the beauty that is perceived by Man's senses is a means of physically experiencing the goodness of God. It was St. Thomas Aquinas who reminds us that there can be nothing in the mind that was not first in the senses. Beauty, perceived in the senses as well as the mind, is a foretaste of the ultimate heavenly perfection toward which Man constantly struggles. The church must therefore be beautiful, or it cannot provide this direct sensory and spiritual encounter with God.

Beauty is Absolute

If beauty is an earthly expression of perfectible divine goodness, there is then such a thing as perfect, or absolute, beauty. God is absolute beauty, just as He is absolutely one, good, and true. From Aquinas' argument of gradation, if beauty is perfectible, one thing can objectively be judged as more beautiful than another thing. Beauty

can never be relative; never "in the eye of the beholder." If it were, beauty would not be perfectible, and therefore not a path to God.

The True Nature of Beauty

True beauty is sophisticated yet subtle. It is frequently misunderstood as being solely the result of exotic materials and expensive decoration. Beauty is actually the confluence of many characteristics, including proportion, scale, symmetry, detail, material, and color. But to that list one must add tradition, what the Pope Benedict has referred to as the "hermeneutic of continuity." It is only by making direct and literal connections to the tradition of which it is a part that a church or work of sacred art can be truly beautiful.

The Lack of Beauty in Our Churches

There are a myriad of reasons why beauty is not appreciated or achieved in contemporary churches. Many of these boil down to the fact that most architects and artists have shortsighted aesthetic sensibilities, focused on being "of our time." Unfortunately, this intent often means a rejection of any type of literal continuity to the traditions of the Church.

There is actually a keen appreciation for the importance of tradition in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. Rather than calling for the wholesale rejection of the past, *Sacrosanctorum Concilium* calls for the careful preservation

of the treasury of Church art and architecture. It goes on to call for “noble beauty rather than sumptuous display.” Thus the importance of true beauty, as distinct from frivolous ornament, is confirmed.

The Way Forward

Beautiful churches are not only possible, they are the most responsible way to build. Given limited funds, a church should be built to last for the long term, which means it must be aesthetically timeless as well as solidly built. There are architects and artists who understand this, who can work within the tradition of the Church to create beautiful churches that will meet contemporary liturgical and functional needs in a transcendent and truly sacred space.

St. Francis was called upon to “Rebuild my house, which as you see is falling into ruin.” One cannot help but hear the echoes of that command when surveying the state of the contemporary Church. Like St. Francis, our first response must be one of rebuilding the physical Church itself. It is to that end that this book is dedicated.



THE TRADITION OF CATHOLIC ARCHITECTURE

ARCHITECTURE IS THE physical manifestation of the sacred Tradition of the Church, and this tradition continues to this day. Maintaining this tradition is not only possible; it is the most appropriate response to the challenges posed to the Church by contemporary society.

Beginning with a mature understanding of the documents of the Second Vatican Council, Catholic architecture has three essential requirements: it must be transcendent, it must be beautiful, and it must be timeless.



Catholic Architecture Must Be Transcendent

Transcendence is perhaps the most important and most often overlooked aspect of Catholic architecture. The Church is a foretaste of Heaven on Earth, and as such must transport the heart and mind into a direct contemplation of the divine. This can be done by ensuring that there is an appropriate scale and relationship between the elements within a church. There must be sufficient vertical orientation both to elevate the senses and to lift the mind to God. The lighting and acoustics must work to create a truly sacred space. Overall, there must be an immediate and undeniable sense that a church is the house of the Lord.

Catholic Architecture Must Be Beautiful

Beauty, the second key element, is often consciously avoided. Beauty is not a luxury, it is a necessity. It means much more than simply expensive finishes and exotic details. Beauty is inherent in the proportions, the hierarchy of spaces, and an appropriate level of detail of each space. Theologically, beauty is understood as one of the transcendentals, or aspects of the divine, which are present in the earthly realm. God can be understood as the perfection of these transcendentals. As such, beauty is an essential aspect of any church, and is an objective and tangible thing, never “in the eye of the beholder.”

Catholic Architecture Must Be Timeless

Timelessness, the sense of the eternal, is another critical aspect of traditional Catholic architecture. Churches are lasting testaments to the faith which built them. All too often, churches are considered as any other building would be, resulting in bland and uninspiring structures that are not well built and need replacement or major renovation far too soon. Building on the examples of ancient churches still in use, new churches should be designed and built to stand the test of time. This means designing within the well-established tradition of the Catholic Church, detailing the building properly with durable materials, and ensuring that the structure is built well during the construction process. Building a timeless church is also the most sustainable or “green” approach, as the value of the building endures much longer than with a lesser building that will soon be outdated. This approach delivers not only the most inspiring buildings, but also the highest value over the long term.