



Episode 4: The Church Building

SUMMARY

The Catholic Church is a sacramental Church which means deeper realities are expressed in perceptible signs. The church building is not a neutral place; it is not simply a skin for liturgical action. It is a *place* where prayer happens; it is a temple where sacrifice is offered.

The building is a sacramental sign: there is found the Body of Christ. The door signifies the crossing of the threshold and entry into the Garden of Eden. It is return to Paradise.

Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy

... While the liturgy daily builds up those who are within into a holy temple of the Lord, into a dwelling place for God in the Spirit, to the mature measure of the fullness of Christ, at the same time it marvelously strengthens their power to preach Christ, and thus shows forth the Church to those who are outside as a sign lifted up among the nations under which the scattered children of God may be gathered together, until there is one sheepfold and one shepherd. (n°. 2)

Dogmatic Constitution on the Church

Often the Church has also been called the building of God. The Lord Himself compared Himself to the stone which the builders rejected, but which was made into the cornerstone. On this foundation the Church is built by the apostles, and from it the Church receives durability and consolidation. This edifice has many names to describe it: the house of God in which dwells His family; the household of God in the Spirit; the dwelling place of God among men; and, especially, the holy temple. This Temple, symbolized in places of worship built out of stone, is praised by the Holy Fathers and, not without reason, is compared in the liturgy to the Holy City, the New Jerusalem. As living stones we here on earth are built into it. John contemplates this holy city coming down from heaven at the renewal of the world as a bride made ready and adorned for her husband. (n°. 6)

Jean Hani

“As conceived in sacred tradition, the temple [ie. church] in itself, and before any liturgical action, is already a *divine revelation*.”

The shape of the building, the door, the threshold, the aisle, the pews, the sanctuary, the altar, the chair—these all mean something. The place for worship is not neutral; it is charged with meaning.

IN THE TRADITION

... You are fellow citizens with the holy ones and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the capstone. Through him the whole structure is held together and grows into a temple sacred in the Lord; in him you also are being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

Ephesians 2:19-22

We must smooth away irregularities if the building is to rise. In the same way we bring you, so to speak, stones of knowledge. You must learn about the living God; you must learn about judgment; you must learn about Christ; you must learn about the resurrection. [...] If you don't join them together into a single whole, remembering what comes first and what second, I will have performed my task of building, but the structure you have will be unsound."

Cyril of Jerusalem, *Protocatechesis*, n°. 11

THE TEACHING OF THE CHURCH

✠ "In Sacred Scripture we find many images which bring out various complementary aspects of the mystery of the Church. The Old Testament favors those images that are bound to the *people of God*. The New Testament offers images that are linked to Christ as the Head of this people which is his Body. Other images are drawn from pastoral life (sheepfold, flock, sheep), from agriculture (field, olive grove,

vineyard), from construction (dwelling place, stone, temple), and from family life (spouse, mother, family)."

Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), n°. 148

IN THE PRAYER OF THE CHURCH

Rite of Dedication

...you have made the whole world a temple of your glory, that your name might everywhere be extolled, yet you allow us to consecrate to you apt places for the divine mysteries. And so, we dedicate joyfully to your majesty this house of prayer, built by human labor. Here is foreshadowed the mystery of the true Temple, Here is prefigured the heavenly Jerusalem.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What architectural features help symbolize your church as the Gateway of Heaven? the Body of Christ? the New Jerusalem?
2. How can the building remind us to care for the temple of our hearts?

FOR FURTHER READING

- Jean Hani, *The Symbolism of the Christian Temple*, (San Rafael, CA: Perennis, 2007).
Denis McNamara, *Catholic Church Architecture and the Spirit of the Liturgy*, (Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, 2007).
Duncan Stroik, *The Church Building as a Sacred Place: Beauty, Transcendence and the Eternal*, (Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, 2012).