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The Liturgical Movement CHURCH SYMBOLISM

By ANNE DILLO
Nazareth College

The medieval artists have made the Church's symbols, as it were, a new creation, in which, as in an epic poem, all myth and all stone, they have been poured as a creature of the visible and invisible world.

Practically the whole body of dogmatic truths could be reconstructed by the explanation of the Church symbols. Our Lord taught His disciples and the multitudes by means of parables and allegories. In much the same way the Church presents her truths to us by means of symbolism. The following is in part a summary from Church Symbolism, by M. C. Neuwirth, O.P.

The Church building itself is the greatest of all symbols, for it symbolizes the spiritual Church, the new Jerusalem. The floor plan of a church is in the shape of a cross which is considered as the Body of Our Lord stretched out on the cross.

The tower has many meanings attached to it. It may represent the apostles with arms stretched upwards and thus expressing St. Paul's exhortation "Look for the things that are above". It is also symbolic of the Lord's omnipotence. The strongest tower is the name of God (Proverbs). The idea of mounting heavenward is also presented. Its battlements represent steps or grades of perfection. While it is an emblem of Holy Church, it is even more an emblem of Mary (Tower of David, Tower of Ivory). Two towers are symbolic of the Old and the New Testaments, also the two commandments of love toward God and toward our neighbor. They are also emblems of prayer, like arms upheld in supplication.

SYMBOLIC MEANING

The entire church edifice is rich in symbolism from the vaulted roof which rises heavenward like a glorious "Sursam corda" down to the very floor, the emblem of vice, which daily is trod underfoot. The church door itself is a symbol of Christ who said, "I am the door. By me, if any man enter in, he shall be saved." Materially it is an emblem of safety against all outside attacks, when open an invitation to pilgrims to enter. It may also represent the Blessed Mother, the Porta coeli. The very stones of the building have their special meaning. They represent the apostles, and prophets the foundation of the Church with Christ, the Cornerstone.

The remaining mass of stones are the faithful united in one body. The mortar which holds them together represents the spirit of harmony and love which joins all the brethren together. Even the walls are symbolic. The left and right walls represent the Jews and Heathen, the south and north the clergy and laity. The quadrilateral formed represent the four evangelists. The heights of the walls is the elevation to which virtue aspires, the length, patience; the width, Christian love. The pillars are like the Church of God, immovable. If there are twelve pillars they represent the twelve apostles.

The windows are the color tress;

ures of the New Jerusalem. They are also symbols of Holy Scripture and the writings of the fathers which admit light to the soul. The rose window is the beauty of Christ or of Mary, the mystical rose. In the pulpit, the faithful are the mountain on which Christ taught the multitude.

ALTAR SYMBOLIC

The altar, however, is the most meaningful in symbolism, for the altar represents Christ. It is erected on an elevation to indicate the mountain of suffering. Three steps represent the Holy Trinity. Five crosses beam in the stone slabs symbolize the five wounds. The threefold linen cloth recalls the linens in which Christ's dead body was wrapped (the same symbolism as the corporal). The white and spotless linen also recall the swaddling clothes, the winding sheet, the spotless innocence of the second Adam. The tabernacle has its prototype in the Old Testament, the cloud-covered tent-abode of Jehovah. It also symbolizes the Virgin Mother. The white covering, represents the King of Virgins. The veil reminds us that still man cannot look upon God unveiled. The candles on the altar call to mind the Light of the World, also the Word made flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary. The cross, the Golgotha of the New Testament, reminds both priest and laity of the expiatory death of the Redeemer of the World now continued in an unbloody manner on their altars. When there is more than one altar, the high altar represents the Savior's Head and the chapels radiating from the high altar, the crown of thorns.

Thus in an artistic manner is commemorated the work of the Redemption and the doctrine of Revelation. In its symbolism, the Church starts with Jesus Christ and returns to Him, with Him it begins, and with Him it ends.

All that is beautiful and meaningful is woven into the architecture of the Church. The glory of Christian architecture is a threat that has interwoven every major event in ecclesiastical and profane history for over fifteen centuries (James Meloney, in Aquinas, Haroon and White). All the beauty and magnificence of the ages is lavished upon the building and adornment of a church for the Christian realizes somehow how terrible is this place, it is the house of God and the gate of heaven, and it shall be called the court of God. (Introit Common of the Dedication of a church).

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Small Boy: "Put a film in my camera hurry."

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At the leper hospital in Makogal, Fiji Islands, Sister Mary Irma, Leper Marist Sister, reads to some blind lepers. Sister contracted the disease while working at the hospital, where there are some 700 lepers. The Society for the Propagation of the Faith has announced its annual Christmas Leper Appeal for funds to aid the thousands of lepers in 100 asylums in the mission fields. (N.C.W.C.)

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