

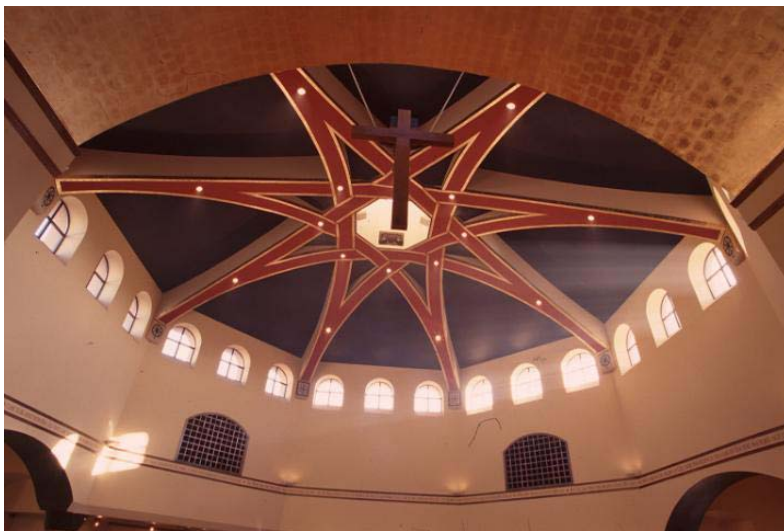
• feature

ST THERESE CHURCH

collinsville, oklahoma, usa

Account by Karen Walker, Architect Steven Schloeder

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On the surface, Fr. Patrick Brankin's commission to California-based liturgical architect Steven Schloeder seems simple enough: To design a Catholic church in Collinsville, Oklahoma that "looks like a Catholic church." But a second consideration reveals the profound implications of such a task, implications that exceed not the capability, but the imagination of many modern church architects.

One cannot merely recreate past architectural styles, such as a Gothic or Baroque, to achieve a church "look." This would be to mistake the model for the type, explains Schloeder, for those buildings were fitting liturgical structures for those times. And although their divine symbolism is readily understandable in our day, the buildings themselves don't necessarily communicate divine realities most clearly or fully to those in our times.



On the other hand, such a task cannot be achieved by ignoring the past and designing the typically asymbolic and functionally driven liturgical structure of most recent Catholic churches. These modern buildings, says Schloeder, offer little, if any, symbolic dialog within the urban fabric. In some cases they are nearly indistinguishable from a medical center, recreation hall or auditorium. In essence, they do not "look like a Catholic church."

Instead, Schloeder believes that a liturgical architect must master the "sacramental language" of sacred architecture in order to successfully achieve "building a church that looks like a church" in a way that is meaningful for our contemporaries.

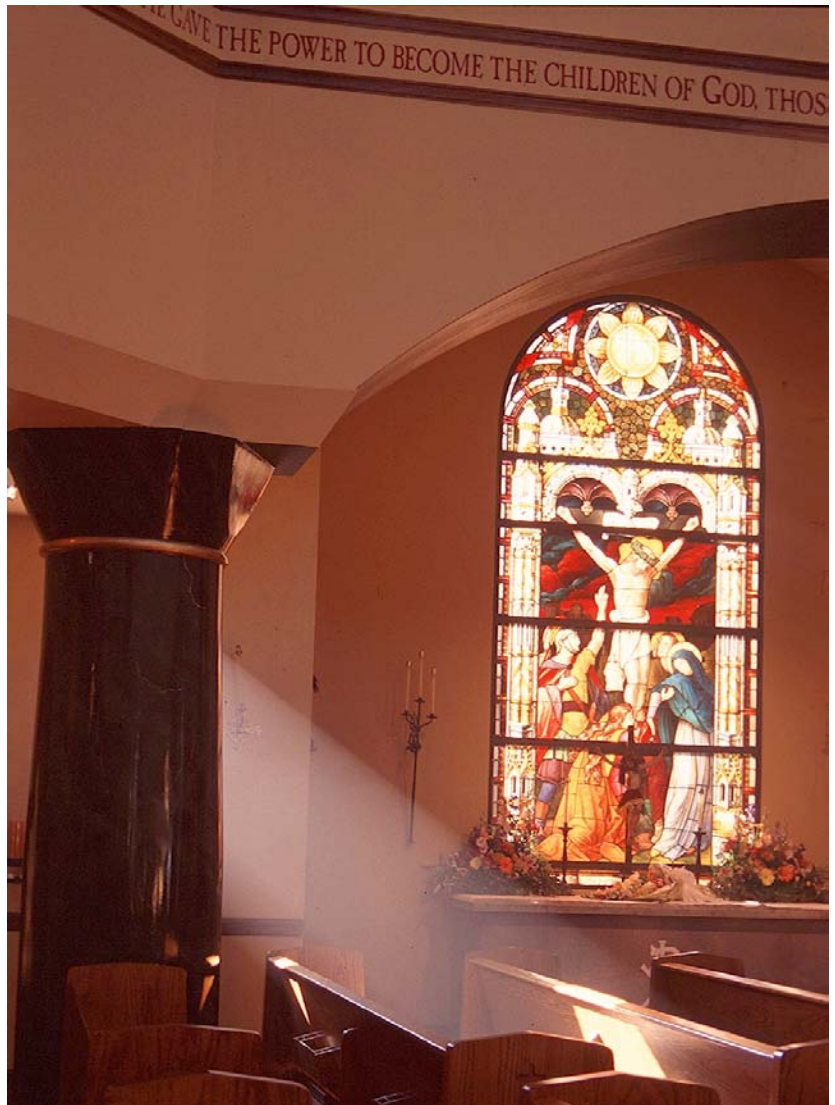
From construction of the earliest known Christian churches—early Christian, Byzantine, Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque—through the mid-20th century liturgical architects understood the archetypes presented in Scripture and developed in Christian tradition.

The great models of the Church as Body of Christ, Temple of the Holy Spirit, and City of God inflamed their imagination, and they sought to convey these ideas in the buildings they designed. The real problem for these architects was how best to portray the theology of church—as Body, Temple and City—through their building. Schloeder thinks liturgical architects must rediscover this approach to church building.

In designing Saint Therese, Schloeder asked himself the same questions as those asked by earlier church architects, and worked with Fr. Brankin and the parishioners to resolve it.

"We must ask ourselves," says Schloeder,

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overall style has a stripped down simplicity with little ornamentation, reminiscent of the humility and simplicity of its namesake, St. Therese of Lisieux. Its only real garnish is the ceiling, which features a mystical rose formed by intersecting arcs around the eight-sided copula opening. The rose is another reference to St. Therese, who was known as "the Little Flower."

"It's critical to design a church building that is rooted in the deep symbol structure of architectural forms which convey meaning through shape, location, function and symbolic identity," underscores Schloeder. "The notion of Body, Temple and City have bigger realities than each of their parts. Each is a whole. But each can also be broken down into individual parts, each of which has its own shape, location, function and symbolic identity."

"Consider the parts of a body or of a city," explains the California-based liturgical architect. He points out that a hand, foot, nose and eye are all parts of one body. Yet each part is distinct, with a unique function, location, form and meaning within the body. For example, only the nose can smell and the eye see, the hand touches and holds things, and the foot bears the weight of the whole body in the act of walking. Likewise, not all parts of a city have the same function, form, location or meaning. A road, residential house, town square and city hall all have distinct identities within the whole of a city.

The same is true of the different components of a church building, and of church. Each different component must be rendered intelligible. "By approaching a church building this way, we create lots of subtleties in space," says Schloeder, adding that the same building can harbor dark, moody places, light and bright places, nodes, transition spaces, lower and higher planes and a sense of hierarchy.

In this building approach, each element is clearly defined with its own shape, location, function and symbolic identity. The nave, baptistry, confessionals, narthex, sacristy, sanctuary, ambulatory and side chapels, are readily identifiable and intelligible.

"This design approach enables us to create a building that is capable of containing great emotion," adds Schloeder. He underscores that this one building must accommodate the profoundly different emotions evoked by such vastly varied experiences as funerals, weddings, sacramental celebrations, repentance, joy, healing, sadness, sorrow and hope.

In the Oklahoma church, one of its key components is the ambulatory which circles around the church, positioned between the exterior walls and the interior columns. Its

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"what does it mean to build the Body of Christ, or the Temple of the Holy Spirit or the Heavenly Jerusalem, for us today?" The task, he says, demands extrapolating rich liturgical symbolism from the prototype of all Christian churches, Christ Himself, and His teachings about church. Luckily for the parishioners of Oklahoma-built Saint Therese Catholic Church, this is Schloeder's specialty. The result is a church building that not only "looks like a Catholic church," but also functions like one—even when no liturgical service or prayers are taking place inside its walls—precisely because its architecture and design elements fittingly draw parishioners to divine contemplation and worship.

"During a follow-up visit last summer," recalls Schloeder, "one of the parishioners made a point to tell me: 'This building speaks silently to me about our faith.' I could not have received a more meaningful or rewarding compliment!"

One might initially describe Saint Therese Catholic Church as Romanesque. But this description falls short in understanding how it models the Christian prototype for its Third Millennium parishioners.

Furthermore, the church's Romanesque-like qualities are somewhat incidental. They are primarily due to the simple massing, and the impression of heaviness and mass, with three-foot-thick walls and windows set 18-inches into the wall to create a sense of weight. The

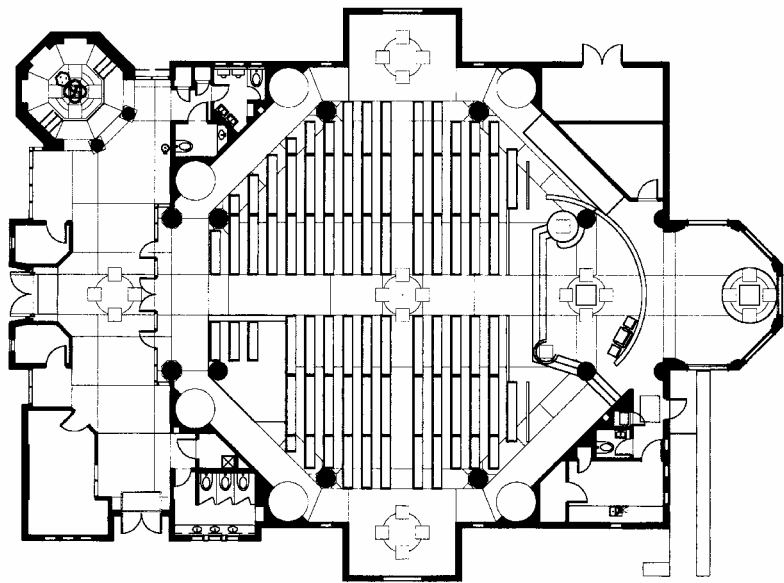


ceiling is 9' 4" (2.82 m), thus creating a sense of intimacy, whereas the nave ceiling reaches upwards 35 feet (10 m).

The ambulatory provides for circulation, and helps create transition zones, enabling the building to do many different things and to "speak" to people in many different ways. It passes by several different chapels and shrines, the Stations of the Cross, ultimately leading to the Blessed Sacrament Chapel. This design enabled Fr. Brankin to incorporate the various devotions of his Anglo, Native American and Hispanic parishioners into the overall structure of the building. The ambulatory symbolically unites the City of God, tying these devotions to the whole through "roads," hierarchical orientation and scale.

The repeating octagon, which occurs most prominently in the building shape, the cupola opening, the baptistery and the rose formed by the eight-pointed ceiling star (indicating the Heavens), symbolically testifies to the Eighth Day of Resurrection. The baptistery is located in a clearly defined area, with three stairs descending recalling to mind that in Baptism we descend with Christ into death in order to rise with Him in glory.

Each element of the church is readily intelligible, silently inviting the worshipper to a greater depth of understanding and love regarding divine realities and his relationship to them. Indeed, the task could not have been achieved without having rediscovered the language of sacred architecture.



For a more detailed exposé of the symbolism incorporated into Saint Therese Catholic parish, please contact
 St. Therese Catholic Church,
 1007 North 19th Ave,
 Collinsville OK, 74021 USA
 and request a copy of the booklet "A Pilgrim's Guidebook to the Shrine of Saint Therese." Mr. Schloeder of **LITURGICAL ENVIRONS** can be contacted at s_schloeder@hotmail.com.

