

Christian symbolism in architecture

I have not visited all of the churches of the 129 parishes of our diocese. Even so, I believe that St. Jerome could qualify for a trivia question:

“What church is most spare as regards exterior Christian symbolism?”

Take a look at the St. Jerome Church building. You will find explicit exterior Christian symbolism only on the east side of the building, and even there you have to look hard. Above the doors to St. Joseph’s Hall, two bas-relief Crusaders’ or Jerusalem Crosses emerge from the masonry. Such a cross usually includes four small crosses, which we don’t have. According to Wikipedia, “The symbolism of the five-fold cross is variously given as the Five Wounds of Christ, Christ and the four evangelists, or Christ and the four quarters of the world.”

I was once in a parish which was building a new church. Among parishioners there was vocal sentiment that they wanted “a church which looks like a church.” One cannot help but retort: “And what does a church look like?” We remember that the primary definition of “church” is the assembly of people called together. That assembly customarily assembles in a church building. Church buildings are designed according to a variety of styles. One perceives the presence of the church, not in the architecture, but in the assembly which is gathered to praise God in the Christian mystery. If anyone says that St. Jerome does not “look like a church,” one’s imagination requires some adjusting.

It would be well, however, to have some explicit Christian symbolism in our exterior architecture. I find myself inclined to encourage the construction of a bell tower. Church bells are explicitly mentioned in the liturgical order for the Easter Triduum. At the Holy Thursday evening Mass of the Lord’s Supper, the church bells are to be rung during the *Gloria*, and then are to remain silent the rest of the night, through Good Friday and Holy Saturday, until the *Gloria* of the Easter Vigil. (The choir currently fulfills this instruction at our Triduum liturgies.) A bell tower and at least one bell, besides being functional, would give us the opportunity to display a cross — the “logo” of our faith — in some fashion.

“Christian symbolism” came in last among the priorities rated in our survey of parishioners a few months back. If we do some construction, it may be done in phases, with a bell tower as a later phase. Let us not lose sight of the importance of Christian symbolism. Let us ring in the Good News of Resurrection!

For the “Build-or-Not” Committee,
Fr. Kevin