

DESIGNING SPACE FOR CELEBRATING EUCHARIST

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Since the implementation of the reform of the liturgy in the mid 1960's almost every church and chapel in the United States has been renovated. Some estimate that even today in most dioceses at least one new church is constructed each year and that many more than that are renovated annually. In short, the Catholic community has invested vast amounts of money in church building projects.

Designing a church building is a complex matter. In addition to the architectural, sociological and theological issues that are obviously involved, other issues frequently intrude in parish planning meetings and discussions. The liturgy has become a lightning rod both triggering and reflecting debates on issues such as the shortage of priests, the role of lay ministry, and the role of women in the church.

Since the question of the proper architecture for a Catholic church has caused a certain polarization in the church, the Catholic Common Ground Initiative, in order to clarify the issues, to promote understanding, and to help pastors and parishioners deal better with this complex matter held a two-session dialogue on the question: "How Do We Seek Common Ground About Holy Ground?"

Two previous issues of the Initiative Report (December, 2000 and March, 2001) described that recent gathering, explained the shape of the discussions, noted the adaptations made that fostered better communication among the members of the group, and indicated, in general, the topics that were discussed. This article will attempt to explain in some detail the content of the discussions and the outcomes of the sessions.

THE PARTICIPANTS

But first, a description of the participants in the dialogue. The group numbered twenty-seven including a facilitator. Present were two bishops, liturgical designers, architects, pastors, theologians, liturgists, an art historian, and an editor of a magazine dealing with Christianity and the arts. Four representatives of the Catholic Common Ground Initiative were among the participants. Three institutes joined the Catholic Common Ground Initiative in sponsoring the sessions: the Liturgical Institute at the University of St. Mary of the Lake, Mundelein, IL, the Georgetown Center for Liturgy in Washington, DC, and the Center for Religion and Culture at Holy Cross College in Worcester, MA.

The organizers succeeded in assembling a group of people whose opinions on the topic covered a wide range from "conservative" to "liberal," to use inadequate terms. That there were fewer representing the conservative side initially created problems which were, however, substantially overcome through use of a fish-bowl technique that redressed the imbalance. In this exercise, a smaller group of equal numbers of conservatives and liberals occupied an inner circle of dialogue with the rest of the group listening to the conversation. The outer circle had occasional opportunities to intervene and participate.

After days of interaction, the uniqueness of each person's position became clear. Whether their opinions would be characterized as "left" or "right" on a particular issue, each person's position gradually took on nuance; the rest of the group realized that labels of "liberal" or "conservative," "left" or "right," only worked in a general way.

As the previous reports indicated, the sessions included field trips to churches with opportunities for the group to pray together in those spaces, slide presentations showing design work by some group members, and homework that asked each member to describe what he or she meant by "full, active participation" in the liturgy, what church configuration, in their opinion, would promote that participation, and whether or not they think there is a "Catholic style" of architecture.

Obviously, the participants did not discuss all of the issues surrounding church building for Catholic worship. Rather, the dialogue developed a life of its own and the topics the group finally settled on grew out of that process. But the issues dealt with were central ones and a study of the discussion should prove helpful for those dealing with parish groups planning church building projects. The conversation focused primarily on three key issues: (1) the position of the assembly relative to the altar and ambo (the lectern); (2) the location of the tabernacle in the church; and, closely connected with these issues, (3) the question of what constitutes full, conscious, participation in the liturgy. Additional topics treated had to do with the role of iconography in Catholic churches, the question of whether there is a "Catholic style" of architecture for churches, and whether certain architectural styles are inappropriate for Catholic church buildings.

THE PROCESS

It took some time before the participants felt comfortable enough in the group to explore some of the reasons behind the positions they were holding. They discovered that age, (the individuals' ages spanned four decades, from those in their 30's to those in their 70's) and their experience of the church, especially during their younger years, had a great deal to do with positions they currently held. Peoples' pasts either nourished their spirituality and sense of church or failed to do so, and this influenced their thoughts in the present.

There was passion in the discussions; participants learned anew how very close these issues are to the heart, to one's spirituality. At different times both sides expressed frustration. Some members of the group decried what they called "the hegemony" of certain liturgical design consultants and architects in today's church. They hold these professionals responsible for design developments which they believe are unfortunate. In particular, they complain about an iconoclasm which is still continuing, about a lack of self-criticism, and about the rejection of criticism when it is made. They say traditional styles have been rejected; modern churches are cold and bare; they also claim that people in parishes have been manipulated by design consultants. Clearly, some in this group believe they are speaking for a silent and oppressed Catholic majority.

The more liberal majority did not dispute the fact that some bad church buildings have been built since the Second Vatican Council, but they pointed out that no new church building style has ever appeared full-blown and that the church has been in a learning situation during the past thirty years. One wrote: "If Romanesque architecture had been seen as perfection, and architects discouraged from experimenting with the gothic style, the gothic movement would have died before the hundred years it took to perfect the style. At thirty years, the new liturgical style is still in its infancy, still self-correcting." Another said: "Growth is always messy and organic." These participants pointed out that one of the reasons for the simplicity of many of the newer churches, in addition to the adoption of some aspects of modernism, has been the effort of the architects to emphasize the key liturgical symbols: assembly, altar, ambo, font. They rejected the accusation of manipulating people in parishes, saying that education is not manipulation.

One frustrating point for all was the discovery that occasionally an agreement reached in theory on a particular design issue evaporated when a concrete example was produced. This occurrence demonstrated both the difficulty of communicating one's deepest thoughts or beliefs, and also how deeply imbedded individual positions turned out to be, even when others in the group thought the discussion might have modified them.

THE POSITION OF THE ASSEMBLY VERSUS THE ALTAR

While all of the participants would agree that the assembly should be arranged in a manner that facilitates full, conscious participation, it quickly became apparent, as we will show below, that not all gave the same meaning to those words.

For most of the participants this statement implied that no member of the assembly should be too far from the altar, that all should have clear sight lines to the action, that the acoustics be good, that

adequate lighting for the assembly be provided, and that there be sufficient space for processional movement to the altar. In addition, these same people would maintain that the assembly's seating should be to some degree gathered around the altar because the assembly is an agent with the priest in celebrating the Eucharist. Therefore the space itself should invite people to participate in the celebration.

One bishop made the point that special efforts at hospitality need to be made today because of the mobility of the American people. He went further and stated that a space with seating "gathered" around the altar helps to draw people in more than a rectangular space with rows of "processional" seating. A pastor whose parish regularly worships in two spaces, one gathered and the other processional, said that he experiences a stronger sense of church in the gathered community. A college chaplain added that he believes a sense of hospitality in the worship space is very important for college students because they are seeking community.

The same participants would hold that the worship space should foster a sense of the presence of Christ in the assembly as well as in the consecrated species.

A few of the participants said that they would not place a high priority on the design elements listed above; in fact, some would even vigorously oppose them. One architect from this group brought the floor plan of a church he had designed. The plan was a long rectangle more than forty pews in length; no assembly seating was gathered around the sanctuary. The space was designed to promote a sense of transcendence and solemnity, and to be a clear invitation to interior prayer.

The same people were very wary of the language of "community" and especially of "intimacy." One member said that the parish should address the issue of community in other rooms of the parish and not in the worship space.

While most of the group agreed that the object of the liturgy is not the promotion of intimacy, they also wanted to emphasize that good liturgy should foster a commitment to a common journey and to these people with whom one is worshipping.

FULL, CONSCIOUS PARTICIPATION

The discussions made clear that different designs point to different understandings of what full, active participation means and what the celebration of the Eucharist means. In the homework the participants shared we find some clear expressions of these differing positions.

While most would agree that we still have much to learn about what full participation in the liturgical celebration means, everyone agreed that full participation must include both interior and exterior involvement. There were, however, significant differences in emphasis when individuals explained their positions.

The majority of the group would say, as one participant wrote, that participation needs to be "proactive" and "bodily," not "reactive" and "cognitive." "While participation includes response and cognition, it demands—even more fundamentally—embodied performance, an enactment." These people would point to the importance of the influence of externals in shaping one's interior participation as well as expressing it. For example, one participant wrote: "Active participation is limited or at least discouraged by altars far away, dead acoustics, poor sound systems, bad dark lighting, poorly placed music, far distant ambos." Another wrote: "I would note that people should not be seated in a way that conveys that they are an audience."

This group would urge active attentiveness to what happens during the celebration and emphasize that participation demands action and interaction as well as stillness and silence. They would probably say that the celebration of the Eucharist by a particular assembly makes the church; hence they point to the double epiclesis (the calling down of the Holy Spirit on the people gathered and on the bread and the

wine) in the eucharistic prayer, emphasizing the transformation of the community as well as the transformation of the bread and wine.

The intimate linkage between the liturgy and social action was sometimes mentioned by members of this group—one of them recalled a fifth way that Christ is present in the eucharistic liturgy, that is, in the poor. (The teaching about the four-fold presence of Christ in the Eucharist—in the priest, the word, the assembly, the sacred species—can be found in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, #7). As one said: “I don’t care where they place the tabernacle as long as the praying community does justice for the poor.

In contrast to that view, some in the group emphasized interior participation, stressing that participation means “being spiritually engaged in the liturgy.” They hold that participation refers to “the union of the faithful with the action of God who offers Himself to Himself in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.” Therefore, participation is “first of all internal—inner, contemplative immersion in the mysteries—but appropriately comes also to external expression in forms both communal and individual.... The communal aspect is achieved less by schemes (ritual, musical, or architectural) to ‘create’ community or stimulate collectivist activity than by concentrating on those realities larger than the local community that are the surest means for sustaining bonds of interconnection, such as: God in Christ, the Trinitarian sacramental life, the communion of saints, the life to come.”

These participants share a suspicion of what they would term “excessive busyness” in the liturgy. One hears their disappointment, and even anger, over some experiences of liturgy in renovated churches in the following: “I disagree with the notion that every strum of a guitar, every possible angle of the altar, and every other face in the church building need be seen at all times because they become a source of distraction from the equally important presence of the rite and the priest and often prevent interior participation. Therefore, within reasonable limits, church buildings may rightly use choir lofts, longitudinal plans, dark corners, Latin, and imagery which reinforces the reality of the rite. It may reject ‘gather seating,’ choir platforms, overly bright lighting, and denial of imagery as inalienable requirements of new church design.”

NEED FOR BALANCE

There was broad agreement, despite differences about the balance of transcendence and hospitality, the vertical and the horizontal, that the essential element of Christian community is commitment to discipleship, not intimacy. The major differences were ones of degree—how much emphasis should be given in church architecture and decor to the transcendent dimension of the liturgy and how much emphasis should be given to fostering the communal aspects of the celebration. While everyone agreed that both are important in every eucharistic celebration, they disagreed about what fosters the experience of transcendence and what one means by community. There was also general agreement that the quality of liturgical performance in many churches is poor and thwarts renewal.

All agreed that church architecture is “the art of shaping space around ritual”; that the liturgical rites of the church are what determine the shape of the church building. But what was not agreed upon was what constitutes the essential aspects of those multivalent rites. Different emphases in the rites dictate different physical spaces for their performance.

For example, one member of the minority wrote that “the architectural setting for the liturgy . . . will be most conducive to active participation when it orients, in every sense of the term, the faithful toward Christ.” He supported the idea that churches should be build on an East/West axis, facing the East.

Further, he recommended that the liturgy should be celebrated ad orientem (facing East) and noted that “the oriens par excellence resides in the Tabernacle, the new Ark of the Covenant, and dwelling place of the Shekinah.” This architectural style traditionally reflected the belief that Christ, in his Second Coming, would come from the East. Nowhere did this participant mention the presence of Christ in the assembly.

In contrast, those who support gathered seating would allude to the Council of Trent’s dictum that

sacraments cause grace in the way that they signify, making the point that the shape of the rite itself, i.e. the human event itself, is the avenue through which grace comes to consciousness. Hence, the importance that the community, which participates in the priesthood of Christ, be gathered around the table of the Lord and that an emphasis be placed on the meal character of the Eucharist as well as on its sacrificial character. They would quote Augustine: "It is your own mystery which is on the altar." The transformation of the community, they would emphasize, and through the community, the transformation of the world, is the ultimate end of the Eucharist.

THE LOCATION OF THE TABERNACLE

At the first session a consensus was reached which states: "We believe that people upon entering a Catholic church should be easily aware that the Eucharist is reserved there. The place of reservation should reflect the due honor and reverence the reserved Eucharist deserves. It should be physically accessible to all, quiet and secure." The meaning of the words "easily aware" was not spelled out. For some, a discrete sign indicating the location of the chapel of reservation would be sufficient; for others, the tabernacle itself would need to be visible.

The group also agreed that "during the Mass the ritual action of the liturgy, and specifically the altar table, should be primary," and that "the ambo [should be] given a prominent place related to the altar."

Part of the group preferred that the tabernacle be in a separate chapel adjacent to the main worship space; some wanted it placed somewhere in the sanctuary area but not in a dominant position, and a few preferred that the tabernacle be a major focus in the worship space.

Most of the participants insisted on some visual separation between the eucharistic action at the altar and the tabernacle. Adoration of the reserved sacrament in the tabernacle is dependent upon and should lead back to the eucharistic celebration, but it is also separate from that celebration and should not be confused with it. One of those who wanted the tabernacle in clear sight both when one entered the church and during the eucharistic liturgy described the Presence as "bleeding into the space and giving it a special feel."

Some who disagreed with that placement (and who could quote official documents to support their views) spoke out of a fear they had. Given the history of eucharistic devotion in the church in the centuries prior to Vatican II, they feared that the dominance of the tabernacle would inhibit Catholics from ever coming to appreciate the presence of Christ in the assembly and from learning the true meaning of the eucharistic celebration. They reminded others that through the efforts of liturgical scholars in the early twentieth century, the church recovered a eucharistic theology that had been lost for centuries.

Prior to the Second Vatican Council, Catholic eucharistic devotion had centered around adoration of Christ present in the consecrated species either on the altar or in the tabernacle. There was little active participation in the Mass by the laity, their roles having been gradually assumed over time by the clergy. The laity rarely went to communion; rather they practiced a visual communion—a "piety of the worshipful gaze." For centuries in the pre-Vatican II church there was little appreciation of the Eucharist as a shared meal and certainly no appreciation of the presence of Christ in the assembly or in the Word proclaimed.

The great majority of the participants, spanning a spectrum of views, realized that a recovery of the dynamism of the eucharistic action was at the heart of the liturgical renewal of the church and that it would take a long time for the Catholic faithful to be formed in this "new" spirituality of the Eucharist. Many agreed as well that the worship space itself must make a clear statement about the centrality of the assembly's action together with the priest in order to foster a proper awareness of that action.

The group recognized that architects and designers have developed some very successful spatial configurations that serve both aspects of eucharistic devotion—the eucharistic celebration and

adoration of the reserved Sacrament—well. All agreed on the need for beauty and distinctiveness in the place of reservation and that some linkage be made between altar and tabernacle. The reasons why all agreed to this were not explored; in the light of positions already recounted this was a curious point of agreement and needed further discussion which it did not get.

Before leaving these three issues that focus primarily on the proper floor plans for a sacred space, I want to relate a concern having to do with another aspect of church building design expressed by a participant who wrote: “I think we have not challenged architects and designers enough to define a space to meet all the needs of our renewed liturgy. We do a good job on the floor, but we haven't come off the floor into massing as well.”

This issue of “massing” which refers to the walls, windows, ceiling, etc. of the church was in the air, but was not discussed.

THE ROLE OF ICONOGRAPHY

Some of the group stated strongly that the relative absence of iconography in many Catholic churches built in the last thirty years is a serious defect that needs to be remedied. Most of the participants admitted the truth of the observation and gave various reasons for it: the adoption of a modern style of architecture which is plain, the deliberate attempt to highlight the central liturgical symbols of altar, font, ambo, and assembly, and the removal of devotional images from the worship space to enhance that emphasis on key symbols.

As the discussion continued, all agreed that Catholic churches should have devotional as well as liturgical elements and that some iconographic elements should be used. Almost everyone in the room agreed, for example, that a Catholic church should have images of Christ and of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

It was clear, however, that if the discussion were to move to concrete details, there would be disagreement among some of the members as to what constitutes iconography and where and how it should be employed in a church. For example, one person wrote:

I would be prepared to admit that a Catholic church virtually always contains an ‘iconographic program.’ (There is already an icon-program in the converted Syrian ‘house-church’ of Dura-Europas. Think of the room converted into a baptistry, with its canopy of stars.) But then, one must ask: does such a pro-gram **NECESSARILY** need to be ‘representational (in the literal sense).’ For example, would the iconographic program of a Catholic church always need to include visual representations of Christ, the Blessed Virgin, and the saints? It would seem, of course, that the word ‘iconographic’ **REQUIRES** the word ‘representational.’ But then, I would refer back to the Cistercian architecture of the twelfth century. In a sense, the ‘iconography’ of these spaces is geometric and ‘acoustic’ rather than representational and ‘visual’.

IS THERE A CATHOLIC “STYLE?”

One of the first questions the group addressed was: Is there a Catholic “style?” After long discussion some agreements were reached—some rather easily. For example, the group agreed that there is a Christian architecture that is distinct from pagan architecture; the pagan temple was primarily to house the god, whereas the Christian church is primarily to house the assembly and its sacramental life.

They also agreed that there is a Catholic architecture that is distinct from some Protestant architecture. Catholic architecture is sacrament- and word-oriented rather than just word-oriented, and Catholic architecture has a strong sensorial dimension that exploits the mediating power of the saints and of material creation. The group seemed to agree that there is no single architectural style that is Catholic, but some of their written homework statements tend to dispute this.

One source of disagreement on this issue was the fact that some held that the architecture of certain historical periods has a privileged value for today's liturgy whereas most held that the church has adapted to major cultures and styles in the past and needs to continue to do so. An example: "No, there is not any one Catholic style." The participant goes on to quote the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy: "The Church has not adopted any particular style of art as its very own but has admitted styles from every period, according to the proper genius and circumstances of peoples and the requirements of the many different rites in the church" (#123).

Some members rejected modernist architecture in particular. One pointed out that a Catholic "style" of architecture

is one which grows organically out of and follows an historical trajectory from the whole TRADITION of Catholic liturgical architecture. . . . The churches of a new era grow ORGANICALLY from what has gone before. . . . The problem with modernist architecture is that it does not stand in ORGANIC CONTINUITY with the 2,000 year-old tradition of Catholic architecture. It is a church architecture 'from scratch.' Indeed it has self-consciously rejected the historical tradition of Catholic architecture.

The same person sees hope in the New Classicism and the more tradition-oriented types of postmodern architecture because "their NEWNESS is in what they have done with TRADITIONAL IDIOMS." This opinion was countered by another participant who noted: "Pablo Picasso said, 'Tradition is not putting on your grandfather's hat, but having a baby.' Almost a century after Frank Lloyd Wright's Unity Temple, in Oak Park, Illinois, modern architecture has been a part of that great tradition of incorporating the modern. Architecture today is as identifiably 'religious' as are authentic Early Christian, Byzantine, Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque religious architecture."

Another member of the dialogue, while admitting that there is no such thing as one exclusively Catholic style, pointed out that "there are styles which in a better, more complete, and more articulate fashion express and embody the complexity and relative importance of the various aspects of Catholicism: the place of the church in the city, the proper place for people, priest, and rite, the union of the living with the dead in the communion of saints, the transhistorical identity of Catholicism and its role in human history."

This person goes on to say: "Certain architectural 'styles' (particularly certain facets of modernism and those design methods which give primacy to the congregation at the expense of the rite and priest) are not suitable for Catholic use . . ."

An architect in the group went even further. He was quite definite about there being a Catholic style of architecture which, he believed, the Catholic is able to discover and which he identified as the Greco-Roman tradition of architecture. His was a view not shared by many others, but to present it fairly I quote him at length.

*...a Catholic church
should be beautiful
and it should say 'church'
to those who worship there.
...the space
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accessible
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in our midst.'*

First, the Catholic believes that architecture was created by God, and thus has a nature in and of itself which infinitely exceeds his consciousness of it. Second, the Catholic shuns relativism. As a result, he is able to make value judgments regarding the facts of architectural history. For example, he is able to recognize the general qualitative decline in architectural scholarship and practice from the time of the late Roman Empire through to the Renaissance. More importantly, he is able to

draw lessons from the history of architecture for current practical action—for to know and to build good architecture the architect must see examples of good architecture.

Thus, the Catholic architect seeks constantly to restore a traditional architecture which embodies substantive principles, while he rejects an architecture which embodies a relativist world-view, as does modernism, for example. The Catholic style, or better, the Catholic tradition, therefore, is perforce the Greco-Roman tradition of architecture for at least two reasons. First, the Greco-Roman tradition arguably embodies with the greatest clarity the substantive content of Architecture. And second, the Church was founded at a time and in a place in which the Greco-Roman architectural conventions constituted the received tradition; hence, those conventions, naturally adopted by the Church for the purposes of the transmission of the Faith, are forever bound up with the Faith.

In contrast, another participant wrote: “Catholics have worshipped in churches covering a wide range of styles. The preeminent examples of Catholic spaces throughout the ages, although quite varied in outward appearance, are likely to have several characteristics in common: indigenous to their time and place; honest expressions of the needs of the church at the time they were designed; strength from achieving excellence in the timeless architectural principles of form, light, proportion, harmony, rhythm, tactility; well-crafted details utilizing available craftsmen and materials, and innovative use of existing and new construction technologies.

Most of the participants would agree that a Catholic church should be beautiful and that it should say “church” to those who worship there. They would also agree that the space should strike a balance between transcendence and hospitality, “a balance between the mystery of God and the enduring and accessible presence of Christ in our midst.”

But where individuals would place that balance point varies. One participant wrote that the issue “is much more one of quality of art. No matter what the stylistic choice, a successful building demands commitment, inspiration, and some substantial cost.”

OTHER ISSUES

Some of the liturgical designers present noted that because of the shortage of priests, some dioceses are building larger and larger churches so that a large parish can be accommodated with fewer liturgies on a Sunday. This phenomenon raises the issue of scale, which has a direct impact, according to some, on the quality of the liturgy and its ability to form the church.

Those who work directly with parishes that are planning building projects cautioned that the pastoral needs of the local community and the money available for a project often limit what is possible in building or renovating a church.

One bishop pointed out that there is a lot of unfinished liturgical business in the church and not enough local bishops are taking the lead to address it. Others pointed out the need for seminarians to be trained in our architectural tradition.

While the American bishops' document spelling out new guidelines for art, architecture, and worship, *Built of Living Stones*, was not frequently quoted in the discussion, when asked if the participants could use it in their work with parishes as a basis of decision making, all but one said that they could. A few reserved the right to critique it where necessary. To dispel any illusion that complete trust had been established among all in the room, one participant said he failed to understand how certain other participants could support the statement and still continue to design as they have in the past!

CONCLUSION

Although a degree of suspicion remained, the atmosphere in the group was friendly and, at times, warm. The participants testified that they felt that the discussion was worthwhile, that they had reached clarity and agreement on some issues and perhaps, more importantly, clarity on where the disagreements lay.

They were appreciative that all ideas had been welcomed in the room. One participant said: "My fundamental ideas have not changed but I can critique them now and I will do so. I will appreciate the minority's voice in parish projects and lead people to honor them. The personal contact was therapeutic. We all had passion.

There was general interest in continuing the dialogue in some way. As a result, an invitation has been extended to the participants to assemble for a meeting and dinner in Chicago in early July on the occasion of the Form/Reform Conference, the Catholic conference on art and architecture for Catholic worship.