

The Sanctuary According to Modern Liturgy: A Liturgico-theological Catechesis

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Abstract

There are some modern church building that are not greatly Catholic churches. Gone are the archs and with them the idea of separation between heaven (the Sanctuary) and the world (nave) and between the priesthood and the laity. The true spirit of Second Vatican Council puts all the elements of the sanctuary in place. This article is catechesis on this sacred space that bridges heaven and earth. There is a relationship between the altar and the tabernacle. The altar is a symbol of Christ and/but the tabernacle contains the Eucharist which is Christ. The relationship between of the table of the word and the table of the Eucharist is also stressed. In the building of churches, care must be taken that all these traditional elements must carefully put in place by architects, builders, liturgists and liturgiologists.

Introduction

The liturgical space is hallowed and given abiding value by the holy rites we do there. It is the holy place where the assembly gathers together, listens to the word of God, enacts a conventional action, and is sent back into the world. Very few know this fact, then, that, when we gather to celebrate the holy action we call liturgy we follow the pattern we use in establishing any human place. We set aside places for two groups of people who play a critical role in the celebration, the assembly at large and its ministers. For the ministers, we reserve areas within the structure for the important actions that happen there and focus those areas, visually and spatially, on central symbolic objects like table, ambo and fonts, known as the sanctuary. Also, we place persons higher in importance and dignity to carry out certain functions in the gathered assembly (Gilbert Ostdiek, 66). There are other five specific spaces outside the sanctuary: the fore-court, congregational space, the baptistery, the aisles and the choir space. This article examines the sanctuary space in general, and the theological symbolic furnishings.

The Nature of Sanctuary

The word sanctuary comes from the Latin, *sanctuarium*, meaning "holy place" or "shrine." The sanctuary is the elevated frontal part of the Church from which the

Mass is celebrated, as distinct from the nave where the congregation sits. There are seven traditional elements of furnishings to be considered in planning the sanctuary. Five of these elements express particular aspects of Christ's presence at Mass: The altar, the celebrant's chair, the crucifix and the ambo. The fifth is the tabernacle in which the consecrated Eucharist is reserved. It is intrinsically related to the sacrifice of the Mass and is in many ways the focus of Catholic devotional life. Even though the tabernacle is not necessary for Mass, nor need it be in the sanctuary proper, its location demands the utmost consideration when planning the Church. Finally, we have the lectern and the communion rail, though not liturgically required, yet they are traditional elements for very practical reasons (Jeremiah O'Connell, 55).

Being the prominent sacred area where most of the ceremonial actions of the liturgy are carried out, it should be spacious, clearly defined and delineated. Its position, size and elevation have a place in the visibility and audibility requirements for a good functional liturgy (Mossi, 78). There is no fixed measurement for it. The size of the sanctuary depends comparatively on the size and shape of the Church edifice. But generally the length stretching into the church should be 34 feet to 44 feet. The width is greatly conditioned by the shape or form of the wings of the church (O'Connell, 56).

Symbol of the Sanctuary

In the churches of the West, the most common orientation of the Church is towards the East- symbolizing hope for the return of our Lord, and the turning away from the Old Covenant and Mosaic Law towards the New Covenant and Law established by Christ (Steven Schloeder, 62). The structure of the church is highly symbolic- the sanctuary represents Heaven; the Nave is the earth and the faithful of the Church. Liturgical furnishings and precisely that of the sanctuary express the dynamism of the new creation as an essential form of the liturgy. The Church continues to preserve its tradition and practices in the liturgy (Steven Schloeder, 62).

The Theology of the Sanctuary

The Scripture is familiar with the idea of the sanctuary, though the understanding may differ a little from what it is known today. In the Old Testament, the sanctuary is often generally referred to as the dwelling place of God (Exod. 25:8), a place of God's manifestation to his people (Ps. 77:13) and a place of stability (Ezra 7:1-6). Another aspect of the purpose of sanctuary furnishings as contained in the Old Testament are the directives given to Moses by God in Exodus 25:8-9, when he says, "And let them make Me [God] a sanctuary...according to all that I show you, that is, the pattern of the tabernacle and the pattern of all its furnishings, just so you shall make it." God insists to have a dwelling among them because the people have profaned the temple, therefore he needed a sanctuary so as to create amongst them a sense of reverence for the Sacred. In the New Testament, Jesus discovers the peace of God at an altar in Gethsemane (Matt. 26:39, Luke 22:42). The sanctuary can then be said to be a place of peace, of refuge and strength. The letter to the Hebrews sees the sanctuary in like manner. For the author of the epistle, the sanctuary is a reminder of human weakness and total dependence

upon God and a place of encounter with God (Heb. 11:39-40). Jesus, the true high priest, who is represented on the sanctuary by the priest, the altar, the Word and the Eucharist, "sympathizes with our weaknesses and helps amid difficulty" (Heb. 4:14-16). And most importantly, the sanctuary shows that salvation comes through Jesus, the true high priest (Heb. 2:16-17).

The Presence of Christ in the Sanctuary

As a result of Christ's incarnation, every matter, space and time is available for liturgical use. Here, the immanence of God is perpetuated each time a place is set up for liturgical celebration. Therefore, the Church building remains a symbol of God's presence. It is true that the immanence of the Divine within the mystical body of Christ is real (Schloeder, 68). The factors that accentuate this transcendental immanence are the sanctuary furnishings. The theological emphases of the Christian tradition using the worship space, the ritual activities embodied in corporate and private worship, and even the past worship experiences of those who occupy the space. Nevertheless, the features of church design are important for the role they play in helping to provide avenues for glimpsing, pondering, and expressing different aspects of God's nature.

Symbol of the Altar

That being said on the wooden altars, there were altars too, that were made of stone, bronze, silver, gold and ivory. Over the centuries, only the altars stones have endured the test of time. As the church developed her liturgy, stone became the predominant material for altars, and with good reasons. The ancient Jewish altars were often of stone, and in one instance Yahweh explicitly commanded that they not be of "hewn stones" (Ex 20:25). Stone also has a particular symbolism for Christianity, as Jesus identifies himself with "the stone which the builders rejected," which "has become the cornerstone" (Ps 118:22-23; Matt 21:42). Through the centuries, the Church advanced in her liturgy and theology, stone altars gradually began to replace the wooden ones. St. John Chrysostom was the first to recommend the use of stone.

The altar is the holy heart of the church. It has two principal reference points. Firstly, it is a sacrificial altar. At the time of Jesus ministry, animal sacrifice as atonement for sin, performed on an altar, was normal Jewish ritual. Christian writers from St Paul onwards saw Jesus as having been like a sacrificial lamb in his crucifixion and death. The altar remembers, and in a sense repeats, that sacrifice. Secondly, it is a table for a communal meal, again remembering and repeating the last supper, when Jesus shared a meal with his disciples. These threads of sacrifice and a shared meal are joined in the Eucharist. Altars are made of stone or of wood. A stone altar will tend to refer more to the sacrifice, a wooden altar more to the meal (Stroik, 25).

A candle can be kept before the altar. A white candle shows that 'reserved sacrament' (that is, bread and wine that was blessed but not consumed during the Eucharist, and is kept for future use, or use outside the church) is present in the tabernacle. Some churches keep a candle in a red lamp alight as perpetual flame, to symbolize the continual presence of God. It remembers the *menorah*, the seven-

branched lamp that God commanded the Israelites to burn before the altar during the Exodus.

Theology of Baptism

Baptism is the first sacrament of a threefold sacrament process of initiation that includes confirmation and Eucharist. Besides washing away our sins, baptism plunges us into the paschal mystery – the death and resurrection – of Christ through which we become God's adopted children, new creations through water, and are given new life through the Spirit. Confirmation intensifies the gift of the spirit, conforming the baptized more to the image of Christ, thus building up the body of Christ, and making its members witnesses throughout the world. Eucharist brings together all the baptized as the body and drinking the blood of Christ, the baptized receive nourishment for eternal life and ask for an even greater outpouring of the spirit so that all people may be one (Mark Boyer, 36).

The effects of baptism flow from the paschal mystery of Christ. Those who are baptized enter into his death by being immersed in the watery tomb of the baptismal font. They are given new life by the spirit. Then, they rise from the watery womb reborn as new creations. Baptism not only recalls the paschal mystery of Christ; those who are baptized experience it. They pass through death to life. They are immersed into Christ's paschal mystery (Boyer, 50). They are formed into the likeness of Christ, members of his body, which is always in the process of dying and rising. That is why Christian initiation must be paschal in character, that is, it must signify the death and resurrection of Christ in those who are sharing it sacramentally. Those who share in these sacraments are prepared to participate actively in the activities that take place in the sanctuary during celebrations.

Theology of the Font

From the theology of baptism flows the theology of the font. The church does not begin with the font and then construct a theology of baptism. The church begins with the theology of baptism and then explains why the font, the place of baptism, is considered to be one of the most important places in a church. The font in the baptistery is often called the tomb and the womb of the church. In the font, one dies to his or her old life; in the font, one is born to his or her new life. Both actions take place through water and the Holy Spirit.

Because of its importance, every cathedral should have a baptistery for the celebration of baptism during the Easter Vigil. The Book of Blessings (BB) says that every parish church should also have a baptistery or, at least, a special place where the font is located (n. 50). Furthermore, to emphasize the importance of baptism, even other churches or chapels may have a baptistery or baptismal font. When a baptistery is to be built or a font set up, the proper celebration of the rites of baptism is to influence the construction.

Thus, baptism normally will be celebrated in a parish church that has a baptistery or, at the minimum, a baptismal font. Except for the danger of death or some emergency, baptism should not be celebrated in private homes or in hospitals.

The Theology and symbol of the Ambo

Rituals in the church are subdivided into signs and symbols. A sign points to a reality outside itself, while a symbol contains the reality in itself. The Lectionary, the Book of the Gospels, or a Bible are signs of God's word but the symbols are the proclamation and the hearing of the word wherein God reveals the Holy One's constantly offered friendship and covenant to the people. The proclamation arouses faith and moves people to conversion, thereby providing the life and power of the Holy Spirit to the believer and encouraging them to live what they hear. The theology of the word, in the action of the proclaiming and hearing, is meant to emphasize that God speaks to people and enables them to respond with faith, hope and charity with prayer and with self-giving in their Christian life.

As the *General Instruction* recalls: The Liturgy itself inculcates the great reverence by special marks of honor. A special minister is appointed to proclaim it and prepares himself by a blessing or prayer (n. 309). The people, who by their acclamations and responses acknowledge and confess Christ present and speaking to them, stand as they listen to it.

Sanctuary Furnishings and the Law

From the historical development of sanctuary furnishings, the altar, the ambo, the chair for the priest celebrant and other ministers, and the baptistery have been major features of the sanctuary. The crucifix, credence table and images came later with deep theological and liturgical significance. The code of canon law (Can. 1168) for instance, stipulates that apart from the image of the crucified required at every altar where Mass is celebrated, no image is prescribed by the Church, but she desires that the image of the Titular of the church, or of any consecrated altar be exposed for veneration to mark the close connection between the person or mystery and the Church or altar that is dedicated to his (its) honour. In the case of our Lord and our Lady, it is permissible to expose for veneration images whose titles are different.

Images in the Sanctuary

In general, usual images are not allowed for use, not just in furnishing the sanctuary but even the Church as a whole. Therefore, what will be said to be the usual symbols permissible to furnish the sanctuary may include, the altar which symbolizes Christ, the crucifix which symbolizes sacrifice and atonement, the Alpha and Omega meaning Christ, the beginning and end (Rev 22:13). The ambo symbolizing Christ the Word of God; the priest celebrant's chair (cathedra) symbolizing the teaching authority of the bishop or priest, the credence table which stands as necessary assistance containing the vessels and linens needed for the liturgy. The images of Jesus and Mary are also used, connecting the place of Mary in the economy of salvation. Other features include, flowers symbolizing the purity of Mary the mother of Christ and the love of the Blessed Trinity; and the fish sign symbolizing the faith of the early Christians. There are some others not explicitly mentioned in the list that are permissible such as the statue of the saint to whom the church is dedicated and the Tabernacle, if necessary. The baptistery is also permissible if the design accommodates it. Equally, altar accessories are

permissible for decoration and ritual actions pending on which is used (McNamara, 142).

Materials for the Sanctuary

The sanctuary can be thought of as the equivalent to the Holy of Holies in the Temple of Solomon. Perhaps the greater loss of the sense of the sacred in our churches in recent decades has been the disregard or demotion of the sanctuary within the house of God. The General instruction of the Roman Missal states that: "The sanctuary should be appropriately marked off from the body of the Church either by its being somewhat elevated or by a particular structure and ornamentation" (n. 295).

The floor of the sanctuary should be designed with pattern and material that aid the focus on the altar, often by the use of a contrasting colour or branding. The use of marble helps to extend the presence of the altar, and to ground it in a holy and permanent realm. Other materials are also acceptable, so long as they are durable, natural and beautiful. The floor could be defined with edges, such as a front and back threshold, perhaps with low walls or railings. As the most "hierarchical" area within the Church, the place of *hier-arch* or sacred order, the sanctuary should be raised to emphasize its importance. Ascending steps naturally imply that there is something important to the top. A raised sanctuary also has the benefit of allowing the faithful to be better see the action of the sanctuary from the nave (Stroik, 23).

The design of the apse, or rear wall is especially crucial as a focus of the sanctuary, and frequently displays Christological and Trinitarian imagery, often surrounded by saints or the heavenly hosts. The use of gold and other colours to give emphasis to the sanctuary aids in reminding us of the heavenly banquet, which the sanctuary prefigures. The sanctuary should imply this vertical access to heaven, of which we partake in the Mass. The ceiling above the sanctuary can be especially helpful in focusing on the altar, by using a dome or vault to represent the heavens.

Conclusion

The Sanctuary is all about giving to God what is due and the best environment that is fitting for His worship. It is also an expression of faith within the framework of salvation history celebrated in signs and symbols for the purpose of transforming the faithful through sanctification, edification and ultimate glorification of God. Consequently, the Church ought to pay attention to every bit of the elements used. It should not just be for aesthetics but ought to be symbolic else it loses its theological and liturgical relevance. This is because there is a constant synergy between the sanctuary furnishings, that is, one element linking to the other, and by that deepens the theological and liturgical relevance of the sanctuary and its furnishings. In the next article we shall discuss the most prominent furnishing, the altar.

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