

Architecture and Liturgy: how space can express a theological vision

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Driving through Potters Bar, a commuter town a few miles north of London, on a sunny afternoon recently I noticed a sign outside Our Lady and St Vincent's Church that simply read 'CHURCH OPEN.' From its outside shape I could see that this was not the usual large rectangular shape of so many places of worship, so I parked the car and went in. And was I glad I did!

Here was the scene that greeted me as I went into the main area from the spacious vestibule.



*The central part of the church from the entrance. It is clear this is a place where people gather around in a common activity. There is a notable absence of clutter.*

The almost-round, light-filled space seemed solemn and special without being heavy, and it gave a feeling of being a welcoming place. And, at once, I saw that to enter this church was to encounter baptism: the font was there in front of you. The same font that welcomes each new member to the whole Church of God was the font that welcomed me as I entered this church. At once I

could see that here was a place where people gathered to listen – the ambo was there not simply as a reading stand but is the place that hosted the book. And, that this was a place where people gathered around a table – and that gathering around a table was the very centre of what they do here. As gathering at the Eucharistic Table is the centre of the life of the Church, so gathering at this table was the centre of the life of this church building. And then beyond, on the most prominent wall one sees on entering the building is a cross – but one which confessed that our faith in the victory of the cross. Jesus has died and is risen. The cross with the grave cloths spread over its arms makes clear that the cry of the gospel is ‘The Lord has risen indeed’ (Lk 24:34).

Walking into the space one’s attention is constantly drawn to towards the centre of the building – lovely patches of coloured light from stained glass notwithstanding – and one notices that the floor is slightly sloping inwards towards the middle area. Whether one is sitting in the front row (there is not really ‘a front row’ in the normal sense) or in one of the outer rows, one has good vision, and feels that one is part of what is happening. This arrangement does not allow for a division into ‘doers’ and ‘spectators’ or any of its cognate binaries: clergy / lay; leaders / led; agents / patients; them / us. The very fact of being in a focused circle is a means to the ‘full and active participation’ that was called for by Vatican II and has been so controversial in some quarters in recent years.

This is not a building that is full of ‘codes’ inviting people to treat it as a theological cryptic crossword. It is not a case that the water is near the door ‘to remind you’ or ‘to recall for you’ that baptism is the ‘gateway’ to the Church. Nor is the central location of the table simply a ‘reminder of what Vatican II said in *Sacrosanctum concilium* about the re-ordering of church buildings.’ Rather this place, this unusual space is a fact! We enter it and we *experience* the centrality of the table to our worship. The building we live in ‘speak’ / communicate / inspire us directly, although usually this influence is inchoate, informal, and unconscious. Some buildings just convey to a human being entering them that this building is about ‘this.’ It is this experiential dimension of buildings that makes having an adequate space for liturgy so important. “We shape our buildings” said Churchill “and then they shape us!”

Anyone coming into this building *experiences* what Vatican II sought to express in words.

The great square table



*The table of the Eucharist is the centre of the building, while in the further wall is the entrance to another more intimate space that can be both part of, and apart from, the main place of synaxis.*

is clearly the reason that people gather in this space. As I looked at it the words of the Roman Canon came echoing into my mind: *Memento, Domine, famulorum famularumque tuarum, et omnium circumstantium*. This verse is never adequately translated because the space imagined by the translators is too alien to the text. But the text fits here beautifully: remember, ‘Lord, your male servants as well as your female servants, indeed all who stand around ...’<sup>1</sup> In an older church building one just could not imagine such a scene, much less one where women stood around the sanctuary, and so we get bland translations. But here everyone can stand around. This is a table with ‘tableness’: it is

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<sup>1</sup> Eucharistic Prayer 1; see Thomas O’Loughlin, ‘The *Commemoratio pro vivis* of the Roman Canon: a Textual Witness to the Evolution of Western Eucharistic Theologies?’ in J. Day and M. Vincent eds, *Studia Patristica: Early Roman Liturgy to 600* 71(2014)69-91.

big enough and noble enough to not just be the table of one family but of a whole community. Here one could be elbow to elbow with one's sisters and brothers in baptism, and with the Christ present in the assembly. Off to one side, separated by glass doors is another more intimate space. This could be used as a 'crying room' or a place for group prayer or any gathering where the numbers suggest a more intimate space than that designed for the whole community.

On the opposite side is another separate and intimate space.



*The chapel of reservation is at once part of the whole building and apart from it. It has a part-gilded portico and the lamp and the stained glass speak of it as a place of special honour.*

Here is a chapel for the reservation of the Blessed Sacrament and we meet another excellent feature of this building. Reservation at the centre of church – and its key focus – was one of those developments that 'just happened' at some time after 1600 and became the iconic distinguishing mark of a Catholic church from a Protestant one. But this central location was incompatible with the liturgy of the Eucharist and served to reinforce the deviant notion that the Mass was there as the means of consecrating the Blessed Sacrament. Hence the preference in the reformed liturgy of 1970 that the place of reservation be apart from the place of actual eucharistic celebration: 'in some chapel suitable for the

faithful's private adoration and prayer, and organically connected to the church and readily visible to the Christian faithful.<sup>2</sup> This is achieved here in that this chapel has plenty of space for private devotion, is clearly marked off as a most special place by its great golden portico, and prominent in the middle of the left side as one enters the building. It is part of the community and its life, but it is not distracting, as an alternative focus, during the actual celebration of the Eucharist. This chapel with its rich ornament and its beam / column of coloured glass is not 'hidden away' but given the sacral note of a precious place apart.

Then finally one sees the space for the presider, his assistants, and those who minister to the community in music. The chair



*The president's chair is distinctive but on the same plane as the seats of all those other Christians, his brothers and sisters, who celebrate the Eucharist at this table. This is the seat of one who leads the gathered worship rather than of someone who worships on behalf of the gathering.*

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<sup>2</sup> *General Instruction on the Roman Missal* (2003), n. 315; the key point was more succinctly made in 1970 version: 'It is highly recommended that the holy eucharist be reserved in a chapel suitable for private adoration and prayer' (276).

stands out as the place of the one who leads the community in worship and in a special way gives voice to its prayer, but it also stands on the same plane as that of all the other members of Christ's body who gather for the Eucharist. We stand on one level equal in our dignity as members of God's priestly people.

There is much else that is lovely and noteworthy in this gem of Christian architecture, but to dwell on all the points would distract from the *great* experience one has on entering it. Here is the home of a people, a community around a table, a gathering rich in memory as they read the scriptures, and one which has its origins in the waters of baptism and vision of risen, new life as its horizon. It is worth a visit to see how the liturgy of 1970 can inspire church buildings that are worthy new entrants to the long tradition of wondrous Christian architecture.