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Liturgical Space and Christian Formation

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Reform or Renewal

The liturgical life of Christians forms their perception of God, their relationships within the gathered community, and the matrix within which they engage the world. Contemporary liturgical renewal within the churches has involved some major paradigm shifts in each of these areas. The new breadth of language used of God, moving away from the monochromatically hierarchic and patriarchal, the clear assumption that the Christian life involves an interdependent community of worshipers, and the unequivocal demand of contemporary liturgical texts for an active engagement in the social consequences of faith are but three of these. As a result, the present generation of liturgical texts has, in some places, created a liturgical piety and, as a consequence, a church quite unlike the one envisioned by most of our inherited liturgical texts whose views of God, community and society were essentially those of the sixteenth century. In other places, the liturgical piety assumed by the renewed liturgy sits like a very thin veneer on a great plank of unexamined piety which is that of the late middle ages—a piety which defeated some of the best efforts of the reformers of the sixteenth century and is doing its best to defeat the efforts of our contemporaries who are devoting themselves to the renewal of the liturgy and life of our parishes.

As a consequence, most parishes today have experienced liturgical reform. That is, either through some sort of parochial consensus or the heavy handed imposition of some ecclesiastic, they regularly use a reformed liturgical text published in the last twenty years—be it The Lutheran Book of Worship, the
Sacramentary of Paul VI, The Book of Alternative Services, The Sunday Liturgy of the United Church of Canada or one of the many parallels from other churches. Yet, as I travel about and visit parishes, it is often difficult to say that they have even begun to experience liturgical renewal. The new liturgical text is used in a style and setting indistinguishable from the old. The medieval piety which our reformers sought to instill with new life in the sixteenth century remains predominant and, in most parishes, completely unexamined.

"Not in my parish," will of course be the first reaction that comes to some of our lips. Perhaps quite rightly so. But let me pose a series of questions which might help to focus my concerns. How often are you told that someone does not like the new liturgy "because it does not provide the same quiet or meditative atmosphere as did its predecessor"? How many of you still have an early service without preaching or music which people say they love because it is a wonderful place for them to come "to say their prayers"? In the past weeks I have had the dean of a cathedral tell me just that. Last night I was told by an occasional parishioner that he "came to church to be alone with God", and that it was important that the liturgical space made that possible.

How many of you meet strong resistance in your parish when you try to increase the number of liturgical ministers by restoring the prerogative of all the baptized to read the lections, lead the prayers of the faithful, or help in the distribution of holy communion? Here, many of my students who are placed in their first rural cures are simply told: "We pay you to do all that."

How often are you told by someone that the presence of young children during the liturgy is disturbing and that they would be better off in some other space for Church School? How many of you have had difficulties when you began to communicate all the baptized—often on dozens of pretexts, but usually on the grounds that "they don’t understand"? Conversely, how often have you heard from children and young adolescents that "church is boring"?

How many of you encounter surprise when you suggest to an inquirer that baptism does not take place privately, that there is some sort of preparation involved in which a variety of members of the community take part and that the dates on which
baptism is celebrated are related to the church’s celebration of the mystery of Christ (the liturgical year) and not to imminent visit of granny from Swansea, Sweden, or Saskatchewan?

How often have you had to deal with parishioners whose primary understanding of the eucharist is measured in terms of their personal unworthiness? Or perhaps you may have encountered some hostility when you introduced something that had the nature of real bread, rather than ecclesiastical fish food, for the eucharistic meal.

If you have experienced any of these phenomena (and I cannot imagine that you have all been immune), I would suggest that we have a long way to go before we have truly experienced liturgical renewal rather than just a dose of liturgical reform. For I would argue that, had we caught the vision of our liturgical reformers, these questions would cease to have been issues because they would have long since disappeared in the renewal of our common life through the renewal of our liturgical life.

What are the obstacles which make it so difficult to move from reform to renewal? The first, possibly, is the naïvité of both clergy and laity who trusted that the introduction of a new liturgical text would do the job by itself, forgetting how liturgical piety is something that permeates the very core of our being. Sometimes we did not even acknowledge there was a shift in piety implicit in our new liturgical texts. (Surely it was simply a failure to acknowledge it and not to recognize it.) If we did acknowledge that piety as well as text was to change, then the matter needed much more specific attention than it normally was given by most parishes at the time of the arrival of their new liturgical texts.

The other factor, and it is one which I think we generally overlook, perhaps because we are afraid of the consequences of looking the spectre in the face, is the liturgical space within which we worship. Perhaps, more than we have allowed ourselves to imagine, this factor alone has been a major defeat in many of the best intentioned efforts of pastors and communities to renew their own liturgical life. It is this question that I would like to make my subject today.

Have you read any good buildings lately?

In a presentation to the (Episcopal) Association of Diocesan Liturgy and Music Commissions Carl P. Daw began by posing the question, “Have you read any good buildings lately?”
While the question may seem an odd one, it helps us to understand that each of us carries with us a tacit lexicon of spaces based on the function they perform. Sometimes this lexicon is intuitive, sometimes it is reflective. Those familiar with the traditional architectural style of many Canadian banks would have no difficulty relating to someone who suggested that "the bank was built like a temple". I have stayed in university residences which were said to be built like motel units and have been directed to look out for the house that looks like a barn. In every case the image was helpful because I have a certain familiarity with temples, motels and barns. I have also met at conference centres which were described to me as being "like minimum security prisons" and was once warned not to appear too surprised when I walked into a rectory to which I had been invited for dinner "because it was decorated like a brothel".

Now, while you may have to exercise the active suspension of disbelief when I tell you that I have never been in a minimum security prison, let alone a brothel, both images related to my unreflected architectural lexicon and gave new meaning to the context in which I found myself. It helped me understand why I always felt claustrophobic and confined in the case of a particular conference centre. It also gave me aesthetic reasons for avoiding brothels should I not have already been dissuaded by moral principle!

If these images have evoked something of your own experience, and if you are prepared to allow that we do carry this architectural lexicon about with us, let me put it to the test by suggesting that many people who visit the dining hall of the college where I teach in Toronto comment that it looks like a church. (Some, of course, are familiar with Oxford dining halls and they usually say, "Nice hall, when did you say it was built?"—expressing surprise that medieval English dining halls were a common feature of North American collegiate topography.) Those who comment on the hall "looking like a church" are simply relying on that part of their architectural lexicon that says anything built in the Gothic style is like a church—because, save for those of us who might travel extensively, or make a professional study of it, or inhabit certain university campi, most of us quickly forget that there was a time when everything—barns, hospitals, castles as well as churches—was built in the Gothic style. Instead, quite unwittingly, many of
us have fallen under the nineteenth century English ecclesiologist Pugin's dictum that Gothic (or "pointed") architecture is the only acceptable Christian style.

The problems with neo-Gothic

Here, then, is the first of our problems in our efforts to renew our liturgical life. Church, to many people, demands Gothic. And, again and again, we have responded to that architectural lexicon and continue to do so. In so doing, we promote a model in which the building determines our worship rather than our worship determining the nature of the space in which it is to take place.

I would not want to suggest that all Gothic buildings are antithetical to liturgical renewal (although I might be pushed into so doing), but I would like to reflect on two phenomena inherent in Gothic architecture as found on this continent which can pose severe problems in our efforts to renew liturgical life. The first is the effect of the pointed arch which is to draw the eye upward. A building well executed in this style can be breathtaking aesthetically. It can remind us that there is a quality to our encounter with God which always takes us beyond ourselves—a not unhelpful corrective in an age in which we err too often towards an encounter with the holy which is incapable of transcending the folksy. You need only reflect on your visit to Chartres, Yorkminster, or Köln to be aware of this.

Yet, in a genuine Gothic building, there is a massiveness which always keeps our feet firmly planted on the ground. It reminds us that while one aspect of God takes us beyond ourselves, we are truly in ecclesia. The sense of the transcendent is healthily balanced with a sense of the immanent. The sheer massiveness of the walls and columns reminded us that we were part of the Body here and now. This was highlighted even more in those buildings in which the architect designed the choir just off-centre so that the nave and choir represented Christ crucified, his head tilted sideways in suffering. Here there was no escape from the ever-present sense that it is we who, through baptism, are united as members of one Body with all those present as well as with those who have gone before us and with the Lord who is both present yet risen, ascended and glorified.
Something, however, went wildly wrong when the Cambridge Camden Society won its way and “pointed” architecture became the dominant, if not the only, style in colonial church building here in Upper Canada and throughout most of the empire. The “Gothic box” became ubiquitous. But instead of building churches that were of architectural consequence, financial considerations generally forced the architects and builders to undertake the erection of buildings that came within the highly restrictive budgets of local communities and which, consequently, became “scale models” of churches “back home”.

I first became aware of this as a teenager. Then, like now, I was a pious bunny. As a Boy Scout I did a lot of hiking and camping up the Fraser Valley and on the West Coast. On a hike, it was not uncommon to encounter one of the many tiny wooden Gothic churches which dot the west coast. They invariably were the object of a visit—sometimes out of the interest of a junior ecclesiologist, more often to escape the constant rain.

Often the churches were locked and, before seeking out the key from some local, our first impression of the building had to be gained through the large keyhole in the west door. There, we would see the whole building laid out before us, as impressive a view we thought as the tourist’s perspective of S. Peter’s from the keyhole in the Piazza dei Cavalieri di Malta on the Aventine. Everything would appear in perfect proportions as one looked down the aisle towards the small chancel, altar with the then-obligatory cross, candles, riddle posts and dossal. There might even have been a piece of stained glass to give it a finishing touch.

When we tracked down the key and let ourselves in, the view from the narthex was much like that from through the keyhole. Everything looked like a carefully crafted scale model of one of our city parishes. But, suddenly, it would all come undone. One of my patrol would make his way down the aisle into the chancel. The proportions would be completely thrown out of balance. The perspective which seemed so perfect in proportion when viewed through the keyhole or from the narthex proved to be all sham—a trompe-l’oeil. The chancel and altar, which seemed an integral whole when the building was empty, suddenly appeared the scale models they were once the building was “peopled”. Even then, I wondered what it meant to
build churches which became aesthetically dissonant once they were asked to fulfill their primary purpose—accommodate the People of God for worship.

Another example of this is a chapel in a large Toronto Cathedral. In its restoration (this time in a neo-classical style) the altar was provided with a baldachino which is also a trompe-l’oeil, crafted and placed to give a sense of both height and distance. Unfortunately, when the presider stands at the altar the trompe-l’oeil is shown to be what it is and the presence of a human being so violates the artificial perspective that it is impossible to watch the presider without suffering from symptoms akin to those of motion sickness. Again, what are we doing when the liturgical space defies being peopled?

I said earlier that the genuine Gothic style balanced the sense of the transcendent and the immanent. The pastiche with which we live is generally incapable of balancing those two dynamics. We have the pointed arch to take us beyond, but rarely the architectural mass to ground us. The consequence is to leave us only with a sense of the transcendent: God is always above us, not among us. Because the proportions are wrong we are given the message (at least subliminally) that we do not belong. The building is at best neutral, but far more often hostile, to the gathering of the People of God. There should be little wonder that in many of our parishes there is a strong sense of tension between the sense of gathered community presumed by our reformed liturgical texts and the desire of many to use the liturgy as a backdrop for their own devotions.

But it is more than our theology of church which is affected by the inherited Gothic space. Our theology of eucharist is also at risk. The Gothic building with the altar at the east end was a perfect spatial response to a medieval understanding of the eucharist which might be summarized in the words of Isidore of Seville as “the moment when the priest calls God down from heaven onto the altar.” The sense of mystery is re-enforced by an altar well removed from the faithful in an area normally inhabited only by the clergy or the pseudo-clergy into which the laity might make occasional forays to receive communion, thus fulfilling their Easter duty. Moving the altar two-and-a-half feet west so that the presider may stand behind the altar/table and face the people often does little other than create a sense of aesthetic dissonance and usually fails to create the sense of
a community gathered around the Lord’s Table which is the proposed end of such a move. In the end, what is often an act of clerical cowardice—“people will not complain too much if I just move the altar a few feet”—fails to account for either the aesthetic of the building or the theological intention of changing the liturgical space.

That forces us to raise the question of the relationship between the aesthetic and the theological. I would suggest that bad art is bad theology because it substitutes something false for something that is true. Buildings that are “pseudo” or “quasi” or “neo” fail to remind us that we are called to offer God something that is real rather than something that is fake—be it architectural style, a musical instrument or the bread which we consecrate.

In reflecting on the relationship between liturgical space and Christian formation it is important to remember that there is nothing inherently Christian about Gothic architecture or any bus-like architectural structure. Having inherited such buildings, however, it is important to reflect on the power they can have to undermine any attempt we might make to build a sense of gathered community, to make known a God who is not just “beyond” or to create a sense of diversity of ministry within the one Body that is shared and cooperative rather than hierarchic and unidirectional.

Other historical possibilities

The basic Gothic model of church building, with its two-room structure and elongated form, has become so fixed in our architectural lexicons and, consequently, our imaginations that we often seem incapable of moving beyond the narrow rectangle when we come to think of church building. It is important, then, to remind ourselves that this particular paradigm for the place of the church’s assembly was not always the case, nor can it be so if our long-term programme for liturgical renewal is ever going to succeed.

From the few surviving examples of pre-Constantinian buildings extant (here the famous house church of Dura Europos will come to many minds) rooms were generally square and functional. The baptismal room gave the assembly the occasion to gather near the font as the community celebrated
baptism. The separate eucharistic hall provided another space where proximity to the table was possible for the whole assembly.

When we think of post-Constantinian churches we are immediately inclined to think of the great basilica with its raised apse and presidential throne and presbyterium. While that, in time, became the normative model for church building—and for reasons directly related to the increasingly hierarchic nature of worship which came to adopt the rigidly prescribed ceremonial of the Byzantine court rather than for any reason that is inherent in, let alone compatible with, qualities that are basic to Christian worship—it was not the only model. Basilica (which invariably we think of being oriented [or occidented] with the raised apse at one end) were not infrequently built with the raised platform centred on a side wall, giving a quite different configuration to the liturgical assembly. Perhaps even more important is to reflect on the other shape often adopted by the church when left to her own ingenuity: the circular building. Here you might think immediately of Hagia Sophia in Instanbul or San Stephano in Rotundo in Rome or the later mausoleum-turned-church of Sta. Constanza in the same city. Here, the altar was placed in the centre of the building and the faithful were gathered 'round on all sides. It is important to reflect on the differences shapes of this sort make on the arrangement of the assembly and the inherent theological messages which are transmitted about its nature and function.

While we are engaged in this process of historical reflection, it would be important to reflect also on what the church did not adopt as a home for its community: the so-called pagan temple. Here the operative principle is quite clear and it was not the abhorrence of places once believed to be occupied by demons. The decision was made on the basic nature of Christian worship itself. The Christian assembly must be proximate to the liturgical action. Temple architecture generally assumed a sacred cultus whose priests would enter the shrine and perform the sacred rites while the followers of the cult would remain outside waiting for a sign that the rite had been accomplished. This was antithetical to the worship of Christians in which the whole Body must be within sight and touch for both the proclamation of the word and the eucharistic meal.

The gradual triumph in history of the narrow, elongated form, with the altar in the east end, re-enforced a particular
theology and ecclesiology which, I would suggest, is antithetical to the basic models we inherit from the early church. While the elongated form does not inherently dictate clericalism, it certainly makes it easier. In a church which was becoming increasingly clericalized and in which the participation of the laity had become vestigial, the shape of the building certainly helped to re-enforce the idea. Once in place, it becomes almost impossible to undo. It is perhaps in this light that we can understand Cranmer’s attempts in 1552 to have chancels walled off so that all liturgical action would take place in the nave and that entry in our liturgical lexicon which equated chancel with the mass and the clergy would be ended once and for all.

While, once again, the elongated church does not dictate a theology of the eucharist which is Isidore’s “priest calling God down from heaven” it certainly is more conducive to that eucharistic theology than it is of one in which the eucharist is understood as all the redeemed gathered around the Lord’s Table to celebrate God’s mighty acts of creation and redemption and to feast on the risen Lord whom they recognize in the breaking of the bread. Once the theology of mystery comes to obscure the theology of eucharistic meal which is its balance, and once the primary mode of lay participation in the eucharist had become ocular rather than gustatory, the entry is made in the lexicon and it is almost impossible to efface.

Where to go from here?

Having painted this rather gloomy picture, it is important to ask, “What is the way forward?” While, at the beginning, I suggested that the liturgical space we use makes theological and liturgical statements which form us more than we, at first, might recognize, and that that formation is often antithetical to the content of the reformed rites—that is to say, we may raise our voices for liturgical renewal but the space shouts us down—there is hope. In some congregations the message of the rites is clearly getting through. When it comes, it often seems to be like a conversion experience. Communities discover something new about themselves and the way things were cannot remain without violating the integrity of both the community and its members.

Over the past few years, I have been approached by an increasing number of communities to spend time with them
reflecting on their liturgical space. The initiative has come as often from the community as it has from its ordained leaders. The initial invitation often involves the phrase: "We need to do something with our building, because it no longer reflects who we are." Upon a little probing, members of the community will begin to describe how they have changed in their understanding of baptism and eucharist—because of the new liturgical texts—and how this new understanding sits at odds with the liturgical space within which they come to worship week by week. What can be done?

As I am asked to enter into dialogue with communities who have come to realize that their inherited liturgical space is no longer an adequate expression of who they see themselves to be, there are three areas of self-discovery which seem to surface repeatedly in our discussions. While these are articulated in different ways they could be reduced to three principles. First, the Body of Christ is a community and not a collection of individuals. Second, the eucharist is the central and constitutive act of Christian worship on the Lord’s Day. And, third, the diversity of ministry which is the church must be reflected in the church’s liturgical assemblies. These three areas of self-discovery have serious consequences for the space in which we worship.

1) The Body of Christ is a community—baptismal space

To say that the Body of Christ is a community and not a collection of individuals is one consequence of the renewal of baptismal theology at which western churches have been working earnestly for almost three decades. It is also a consequence of churches who are finally honest enough to admit that the age of the Constantinian church is over and that the folk-church is dead—at least in North America.

The plurality of biblical images which have found their way into our new baptismal liturgies have provided a theological richness which has quite rightly led to an elaboration of the liturgical action surrounding baptism. We are naturally led to the generous use of chrism to act out the anointing with the Holy Spirit and the new status of the neophytes as anointed members of a royal priesthood. Baptismal candles are given
to sign the reality that the newly baptized have become one with those called to bear the Light of the World before others. Increasingly, we find the newly baptized being enveloped in the white baptismal robe (the most ancient of all liturgical vestments) signing their having “put on the Lord Jesus Christ”.

What has begun to shout out most loudly for reform, however, is the one element which is fundamental to baptism: water and the way we use it. In an age in which, for the first time in at least thirteen centuries, the church is again baptizing as many adults as it is infants, the inherent symbolism of the font and the space in which it is placed demands to be taken with renewed seriousness.

Those who are engaged in ritual studies remind us that symbols are natural, not invented, and that they are both multivocal and multivalent. That is to say that they bear a variety of meanings and that those meanings are both positive and negative. Water not only cleanses, refreshes and quenches thirst, it also threatens death by drowning either in the watery deep or in the torrents of a flood that sweep everything away in its path. How can some of those natural symbols associated with water be allowed to speak in the act of baptism?

In the baptismal font we need to find a pool to bathe in, a womb to be born from, a tomb to be buried in, and the well from which we can draw the living water which quenches all thirst. These are realities which must communicate themselves not only to baptisands but also to members of the Christian community who participate in the baptism of others and who weekly celebrate the renewal of the baptismal covenant in the eucharistic mystery. This demands not only a renunciation of our scholastic fixation with liturgical minimalism—“how little water or how few words do we need to make it work”—it also forces us to renew our baptismal spaces.

Of the many things which need to be said, the first, and most obvious, is that the alabaster bird-baths that decorate our churches cannot bear the weight they are asked to carry. In the majority of our churches the architectural lexicon associated with baptism still reads “infants”, “private”, and “disassociated from the life of the community as a whole”. It is little wonder that many parish clergy have a difficult go at renewing baptismal practice in the life of their communities.
What can be done in the ordinary parish church? First of all, I believe we need a major stimulation of the imagination. This involves seeing some good renewed baptismal spaces in actual use. Several years ago I came to realize that a lot of my students looked at me as if I were a visitor from Pluto when I talked about new baptismal space. Because they had never seen an example, they could not imagine it. Now, each year, as we act out baptism in Pastoral Liturgy class, we “baptize” an adult with lots of water, in an English perpendicular chapel, respecting both the demands of the liturgy and the inherited liturgical space. Imaginations are excited and it becomes apparent to students that the ordinary parish church could do similar things. Of course, the ideal effect of this stimulated imagination eventually should lead to a major renovation of the baptismal space. Until that happens, interim measures are possible. What needs to be done?

First the font needs to make its way from any corner in which it might be hidden to a place where it is clearly visible by the worshiping community—not just at the times when baptism is being celebrated but week by week so that the faithful are reminded that it is through the waters of the font they were given right and title to a place in the assembly and at the Lord’s Table.

I am less keen than I once was to say that the font should be as close to the principal entrance as possible. While that clearly says the font is our entrance to the church we need to ask the question of whether or not that also says that it is our custom to baptize strangers who simply arrive at our door. While that was an appropriate location for the font in a medieval church where all society was assumed to be Christian, communities where the restored catechumenate has won a place remind us that baptism comes at one step on a journey which has already involved welcoming the stranger into our midst and who, after an extended relationship, not unlike courtship, has come to the font. Should not the font, then, perhaps be part way down the aisle that leads to the altar/table?

The font also needs to say that baptism is for all people—young and old alike. Those who come to the font as adults must not be made to feel as a curious anomaly—something that led us to baptize adults privately not so many years ago (often minutes before their public confirmation!). While the baptism
of the infants of believing parents will always have a place in the life of the church and is useful bespeaking, as it does, that new life in baptism remains a free and unmerited gift from God, we cannot deny that the fullness of the baptismal mystery is most clearly visible in the baptism of a believing adult. It is important, then, that our baptismal spaces proclaim that baptism is intimately related to the mission of the church and not that we are suffering from a failure of sense of mission by allowing it to proclaim that the only subjects of our Christian mission have become our own progeny.

For those of us who are not Lutherans, we were never taught to emulate Martin Luther who, we are told, would say to himself daily: “I am baptized. I am baptized.” In fact, some of us grew up in churches where there was no sense of the baptismal covenant whatsoever. If there was an initiatory event that was significant in our lives it was confirmation, for that was clearly the sacrament that admitted to membership in the church (rather than church school) and to the eucharist. As children (and often as adults) we never witnessed a baptism unless we happened to have younger siblings or were asked to be godparents. It is little wonder that many of our churches suffer from a low baptismal piety.

Present efforts to renew our baptismal piety and to create a lively sense of the covenant of grace are surely not misdirected. Where we locate our baptismal space and how we treat it plays a major rôle in the renewal of our baptismal piety. Honouring the font by its dignity and location is not unimportant in that renewal. Fonts are for holding water and not flower pots whether we are actually baptizing or not. Passing the font needs to become a rememorative event for all of us and perhaps particularly for the young. We need to assure the presence of water—best of all living water—so that all who pass by may be drawn into the richness of images evoked by water but are not, I would suggest, by an empty alabaster or wooden receptacle.

All of these suggestions are, I believe, possible in the average church building and need not involve a massive financial expenditure. They are, however, short-term measures and await the planning for long-term renewal of baptismal space which needs to find its way into the life of all our communities.
Without these modest measures, I can only see ongoing conflict between the theology of the rites and the spaces in which we celebrate them. In most cases the spaces will win and we will live, frustrated and unhappy, with the consequences.

A final consideration which any parish will have to face as it renews its baptismal space is how much water can be used in baptism. Is space for pouring sufficient or do we need to provide tanks for immersion? Tradition will tell us that it was customary to have the candidates stand in a pool and then pour water over them. Contemporary pastoral experience would lead us to believe that, for many adults who come for baptism, the sense of death by drowning and being raised to new life is very important as a sign of what is happening to them. If this is the case, and I believe in many instances it is, long-term renewal of baptismal space is considerably more complicated than the more manageable pools for pouring.

2) The eucharist is the central and constitutive act

The second area of self-discovery in an increasing number of parishes is that the eucharist is the central and constitutive act of Christian worship on the Lord’s Day. After centuries of rhetoric in which many of our traditions claimed this to be true, yet did nothing to make it real in the average parish community, the reformers of the sixteenth century are finally seeing their intentions fulfilled. This present rediscovery of the balance between word and table is bringing many parishes to life in a way they had not known before. This, at least in part, is attributable to the sense of community inherent in the new eucharistic rites as well as the very clear relationship between eucharistic community and society at large. The recovery of the eschatological character of the eucharist in which we weekly taste the antipasto of God’s reign, has transformed many communities’ understanding of both themselves and their relationship to the world.

This renewed understanding of the eucharist has led to the posing of serious questions about the space in which the eucharist is best celebrated. The rediscovery of the eucharist as the eschatological meal at which all the faithful meet begs the questions of visibility, gathering, and the tension between altar and table. The so-called two room arrangement of liturgical
space, typified by the Gothic building, fails to respond to these re-discovered dimensions of eucharistic worship.

Beginning thirty years ago, a few parishes dared to move their altars a few feet from the wall so that presider and people could face one another. At the time, this was seen as liturgically radical and had a profound effect on how communities came to understand the eucharist. There are very few communities any longer who would claim that the eastward celebration of the eucharist can begin to bear the theological weight of our new eucharistic liturgies.

For a while, that modest re-arrangement of liturgical space satisfied many communities. Today, an altar that is at the east end of the chancel, often cut off from the nave by the choir and perhaps a rood screen, is leaving an increasing number of communities dissatisfied. If the altar is to be the obvious focal point for a God whose self-giving we recognize in the breaking of bread, then the place of self disclosure is appropriately in the midst of the people, at the crossing, well in front of the choir, and not as far from the faithful as is possible.

A few communities were fortunate enough to inherit buildings built on a square, rather than a rectangle. These are relatively easy to renew with the altar placed in the centre and the community gathered around on all sides. (The parish of St. Thomas’ in St. Catharine’s, Ontario, is a local example of a successful renewal of liturgical space on this model.) Gothic and other rectangular buildings are often more difficult to renew successfully because the narrowness of the building defeats any attempt to arrange the space so that there is a genuine sense of gathering around the table. Some communities are finding that the only way they can free themselves from the restrictions imposed by this narrowness of structure is to re-orient their space using the building on its horizontal, rather than vertical, axis. That is, placing the altar/table parallel to a side of the building and gathering the community around it on at least three sides, an arrangement similar to that in some early basilicas.

The form that the altar/table itself takes is not a matter of indifference. While the dichotomy of eucharist as meal or sacrifice is ultimately false, it is a inherent tension in whatever form the altar/table takes and one which is not easily resolved. Perhaps in an age in which the equation eucharist=resurrection
meal has been so obscured by the equation eucharist = memorial of the death of Christ, and altar/tomb has so dominated altar/table, we should willingly allow ourselves to err in the direction of table and resurrection meal. The balance is a delicate one but, with some good teaching on the roots of sacrifice, what is loss for some, in the end, may be gain for all. Simply reducing the altar/table in size so that it becomes square, rather than rectangular, can help maintain the balance and keep both images in healthy tension. Dressing it with fair linen and candles at the preparation of the gifts can highlight its table-like qualities as the community prepares for the meal. Once again, there are interim measures which can serve as a temporary response to the larger question of renewing the space in which we celebrate eucharist.

3) The diversity of ministry within liturgy

The third area of re-discovery which affects our use of liturgical space is the new awareness of the diversity of ministry which is the church and which must be reflected in the church’s liturgical assemblies. Our renewed baptismal theology has helped many communities to discover that ministry begins at baptism. There is no such thing as a Christian without a ministry regardless of age, gender, intellectual development or any other category one might choose to impose.

It is that understanding that begins to give meaning to liturgy as laos ergon—the work of the people. Each of us is called to full, active, conscious participation in the liturgy by right of our baptism. At the same time, as Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians, we do not all have identical ministries. There is a variety of liturgies (particular works like presiding, reading, leading song, playing musical instruments, leading prayers, distributing communion, serving) going on in the context of the one liturgy. No one should usurp the liturgy of another. Our liturgical space must acknowledge and support this variety of ministries for the church is seen at its best when the variety of ministries that make up our common life are brought together and made one in the perfect offering of Christ our head who intercedes for and with us. The long and sad history of the clericalization of all liturgical ministry must be undone.

Unfortunately, the arrangement of most of our liturgical space causes alarm bells to sound and lights to flash “violation of clergy space” the moment anyone not vested as a
cleric or pseudo-cleric leaves their place to exercise a liturgical ministry—be it reading, leading prayers, or distributing communion as the case may be. Such an arrangement of our liturgical space immediately puts the lie to everything our rubrics affirm when they say that “the celebration of the eucharist is the whole people of God.” It should be little wonder, then, that many people fail to take us seriously when we talk about baptismal ministry. Quite rightly do they detect a fraud and not without reason do they see a diversity of liturgical ministries as an effort to involve the laity for numbers’ sake rather than exercising ministries that belong to the laity by right of their baptism. Once again, our attempts at liturgical renewal are shouted down by the spaces in which they take place. We need to re-think the arrangement of our liturgical spaces so that all who exercise liturgical ministries do so without violating the entry “clerical space” in our lexicon. This means re-thinking at least the places from which we read, lead prayer and receive communion.

4) Where the word is preached

In all I have said until now, I have made no mention of the place from which the word is preached. This is, in part, intentional as it was never an area immediately identified by the communities who have asked me to discuss space with them. When it emerged, it was in the context of access to space. I have never been given the sense by any community that the preaching of the word was being devalued. There was, however, a strong sense that those who exercised the ministry of reading the first two lections should have access to the place where the word was to be proclaimed without apparently violating clergy space. At the same time, when the question was raised, there was a strong sense that the preaching of the word should take place from the same place at which the lections took place. When pushed to reflect on this, there was often an expression of the sense that the word was a common possession of the whole people of God and that it should be “broken open” by the preacher on the level at which it was read rather than from a pulpit which was high and lifted up above the congregation. Repeatedly, the pulpit was one of the most negative features about their liturgical space which was identified by the communities with which I have worked.
Here I am of two minds. An initial reaction was to suggest that this is the product of a liberal society in which no one or nothing is accorded inherent authority and anything high and lifted up is seen as being anti-democratic. I have come to believe that is an unworthy reaction because here, again, I believe the internal lexicon is doing its job and doing it well.

After considerable reflection, I would suggest that what the lexicon is saying is that pulpits have traditionally been the place where the word has been aridly expounded without making any serious attempt to relate it to the lives of the faithful. It has been a place where many feel that law has been promulgated over gospel and where preachers have failed to make themselves vulnerable, appearing unassailable from their Olympian heights. If this is an accurate reading of the lexicon, then I think we must be prepared to abandon the pulpit and gladly make the ambo the place from which the word is both read and preached.

Encouragement with a caution

I would like to end with both a word of encouragement and of caution. The encouragement is that addressing the question of liturgical space is both necessary for the life of our communities and, when addressed, will bear much fruit. Unless you happen to be of the opinion that our renewed liturgical texts should never have supplanted their forebears, you will, at least retrospectively, see that the renewal of liturgical space is an intrinsic part of the unending process of liturgical renewal. In the way that our reformed texts have helped congregations to engage in the major paradigm shift of how they image God, fashion their community and are to understand their relationship to the world, the renewal of liturgical space will enable that process of liturgical renewal to achieve its natural end and bear the fruits thereof.

The word of caution is that if you thought that the introduction of new liturgical texts was an issue which elicited strong visceral reactions, those will pale when compared to what will happen for some when you begin talking about moving “things” in church. My only counsel is that you must help people acknowledge that hurt and then to give it positive rather than negative value. The visceral reaction is understandable in
that it is a reaction to the perceived violation of space that has been made holy by the actions that have taken place there— "my marriage", "the baptism of my children", "the burial of my spouse". The feelings attached to those spaces are understandably strong and need to be hallowed not dismissed. That said, my invariable experience has been once those feelings are acknowledged and given positive value, you can move on.

The task is rarely easy. It takes patience, lots of teaching and usually more time than most communities devoted to preparation for their new liturgical text. I have never found a community that regretted having undertaken the task nor have I found a community that didn’t claim that a renewed space didn’t better equip them for their mission in the world. And that, in the end, is what liturgical renewal is all about.

When you go home, sit in a pew in your church. Open your architectural lexicon and begin “reading” your church. Are the messages concordant or discordant with the general aims of liturgical renewal? If discordant, you risk merely living with liturgical reform rather than with renewal until the textual and spatial messages become one. I commend the task of working towards that concordance to you. Be of good courage. And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

Note

1 Published as “The Exegesis of Liturgical Space” in Open [The bulletin of The Associated Parishes for Liturgy and Mission] (March 1987). I clarified experiences from my own childhood.