

**Heavenly *house*, heavenly *stage*, heavenly *place*:  
Renewed worship spaces for liturgical renewal**

**Lar celestial, palco celestial, lugar celestial:  
espaços sagrados para renovação litúrgica**

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**ABSTRACT**

This article intends to propose a certain set of principles behind the idea of sacred space. In that regard, two important analogies are addressed: worship space as a heavenly house and worship space as a heavenly stage. It provides a brief overlook on the history of worship spaces and seeks to reclaim the idea of liturgical space as holy stage, where all people are liberated to let go of pre-assigned roles they are given by society and embody the roles they were created to fulfill. Finally, the article examines some common liturgical movement approaches to worship spaces, and suggests a set of practical questions which should guide faith communities when renewing their sacred spaces for mission and God's witness.

**KEYWORDS**

Sacred space, Liturgy, Liturgical Renewal, Liturgical space.

**RESUMO**

Este artigo busca propor um conjunto de princípios por detrás da ideia de espaço sagrado. Nesse sentido, duas analogias importantes são previstas: espaço litúrgico como casa celestial e espaço litúrgico como palco celestial. O texto analisa brevemente o histórico dos espaços de adoração e busca restaurar a ideia do espaço litúrgico como palco santo, onde todas as pessoas são libertas para deixar seus papéis societários

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predefinidos e incorporar os papéis os quais foram criadas para exercer. Finalmente, o artigo examina algumas abordagens comuns do movimento litúrgico para espaços de adoração e sugere um conjunto de questões práticas que devem guiar as comunidades de fé ao renovar seus espaços sagrados para missão e testemunho de Deus.

### **PALAVRAS-CHAVE**

Espaço sagrado, Liturgia, Renovação litúrgica, Espaço litúrgico.

### **Introduction**

Imagine a family gathering. A group of people, bound together by love, voluntarily chooses to assemble together in the same common house. The elderly find their places in comfortable chairs, children run around, people happily greet each other and share expressions of joy. At a certain point, there is silence. Some people who are held as wise and righteous read a thoughtful text, share a few words and offer some prayers. Other family members add their perspectives and contribute to a joint discussion on what is necessary for them to grow in life together. Somebody leads all in joyful music. Eventually, people are called to a table, where a meal is served. The table is set with the best linens, chandeliers and china, and people bring dishes which are meant to be shared by all. Prayers and blessings are offered and all give thanks for having food, happiness, and fellowship. All come to the table and help themselves. The ones who need to be fed by others have priority. And the feast continues until all are satisfied and it becomes time to clean up the table and end the party. But it was “such a good party”... So good that people actually yearn for the next opportunity to gather together and start it all over again...

The depiction of such family gatherings might remind most people of happy events in their lives, which are shared by most cultures and which would be accessible to all if the burden of extreme poverty did not affect so many groups in contemporary societies. However, it is also a perfect depiction of what Christian worship *should* be. But it is not.

There is plenty of biblical and liturgical scholarship that emphasizes how our worship events should reflect the vision of a joyful feast, where

all have an active participation and are nourished by a life-giving and grace-flowing God. Over and over, we repeat we are a single family, yet some among us seem to be regarded as more important than others. And despite all the hard work that has been done in terms of liturgical renewal, prayer revision and Christian education, our worship spaces mostly discriminate people according to assigned roles, limit access of certain groups of people to full participation in worship and emphasize differences instead of commonalities.

### **A brief overlook on liturgical reform**

It is possible to briefly define a few elements that guided liturgical reforms that took place in (the Roman Catholic Church and) most liturgical/sacramental Western Churches in the last sixty (or so) years:

- By rediscovering the worship practices of the Early Church, it understood liturgical rites as patterns to be followed, with instances that often changed from place to place, according to the needs and customs of local churches. This permitted wholesale revision of liturgical books, which were broadened to include a multiplicity of Eucharistic prayers, collects and optional rites – as long as they followed the shape that they have always followed. It also greatly diminished the gap between rites that belong to different Church communions and restored ancient liturgies (such as Holy Week liturgies) to the life of the Church.
- Worship was seen as an organic human activity, and therefore needed to be connected to aspects of people's lives. This provided arguments for the simplification and inculturation of liturgical rites – so that the whole assembly could have a grasp of what the texts actually say and see in them an instrument of teaching and mission adapted to local contexts.
- An active participation of the people in worship implies a multiplication of lay ministries and opportunities for the assembly to engage more fully in worship. It also aims to restore the importance of Baptism in the life of the Church, by granting each person the possibility of fully living their priesthood of all believers.

- At the same time, it must not be forgotten that there's an transcendent component to liturgy<sup>2</sup>, especially in a sacramental context. If it is possible to stretch de Lubac's saying ("while the Church makes the Eucharist, the Eucharist makes the Church")<sup>3</sup>, liturgy makes the Church. A liturgical life also includes moments of awe, contemplation and drama.

As the sweeping winds of reform blew upon different Church communions, many visible changes were perceived in churches. The new liturgies often demanded reordering of church spaces, renewal of church music and experiments in ritual that gradually changed the way we *do* and *see* Church. The aesthetic dimension remains definitely an important element of liturgical reform and it should be used in order to counteract the "didacticism and over-verbalization"<sup>4</sup> that characterize so many services nowadays. It also suits the transcendent aspect of worship and allows people to better respond to God.

However, it is not uncommon to find worship services (and no major denomination is excluded from this observation) which are dull and lack any kind of major participation from the assembly (other than mumbling hymns and responses and forming a long line in order to receive communion). Great efforts have been made by several liturgical committees in order to offer guidelines for architecture, music and ritual. Yet, this problem persists. A good deal of criticism has arisen in the latest years, dealing, for example, with the adoption of the vernacular and the insistence on visibility of liturgical action<sup>5</sup>, the loss of an ethos of majesty<sup>6</sup> and simplifications of collects and other liturgical texts<sup>7</sup>. Curiously many

<sup>2</sup> LUBAC, Henri de. *Corpus Mysticum: L'eucharistie et l'Eglise au Moyen-Age*. Paris: Éditions du CERF, 2010, p. 79.

<sup>3</sup> LUBAC, 2010, p. 103.

<sup>4</sup> BALDOVIN, John F. *Reforming the liturgy: a response to the critics*. Collegeville Minn: Liturgical Press, 2008, 153.

<sup>5</sup> NICHOLS, Aidan. *Looking at the liturgy: a critical view of its contemporary form*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996, p. 61-62.

<sup>6</sup> MANNION, M. Francis. "The catholicity of the liturgy: shaping a new agenda". In: *Beyond the prosaic: renewing the liturgical movement*. Edited by Stratford Caldecott. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998, p. 18-19.

<sup>7</sup> DUFFY, Eamon. "Rewriting the liturgy: the theological implications of translation".

critics often focus on texts, language, music and liturgical acts<sup>8</sup>, without making the case for a theology of the liturgical space *per se*. Perhaps due to the well-known corollary “form follows function”, critics of liturgical reforms tend to approach the topic as a consequence of textual and ritual reforms, and tend to see the reinstatement of what they see as proper liturgical spaces as a something that will naturally derive from the “reform of the reform” they propose.

On the other hand, reformists have not tackled the theology of liturgical spaces as a single issue very often. Most liturgical scholars have dedicated far more attention to other issues such as historical theology, liturgical theology, the use of language and sacred music. Some authors do present ideas regarding the organization and ordering of sacred spaces. Others will study the theology of sacred art. But very few offer an all-encompassing approach that takes into account a holistic vision of the worship space in theological terms. And when they do, it often follows certain restrictive formulas and standards which should be applied objectively<sup>9</sup>.

### Shape of the liturgy and shape of the liturgical space

What if we took into account Dix's<sup>10</sup> insights in terms of shape (by itself a word which directly relates to spatial form) in order to present a theology of liturgical space? Worship spaces have become boringly standardized. When the reform became a *fait accompli* and most churches were reordered or rebuilt, what sounded as innovative became ordinary and predictable. Manuals and guidelines reflect this tendency by

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In: *Beyond the prosaic: renewing the liturgical movement*. Edited by Stratford Caldecott. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998, p. 100.

<sup>8</sup> In *Reforming the liturgy*, Baldovin addresses a series of criticisms of liturgical reform in a Roman Catholic context. See John F. Baldovin, *Reforming the liturgy: a response to the critics* (Collegeville Minn: Liturgical Press, 2008, p. 144-168) for a set of criticisms and well detailed responses to them.

<sup>9</sup> In the section “So where do we go now?” I will address some contemporary approaches to the liturgical space in more detail and in contrast to the proposal of this article.

<sup>10</sup> DIX, Gregory. *The Shape of the Liturgy*. 2nd ed. Dacre Press Westminster, 1949, p. 214.

stipulating specifically where each piece of furniture should go<sup>11</sup> and the limited number of suppliers and companies focused on church building and renovation reduces the vernacular of sacred arts to standardized pieces, whenever there are not enough funds for specific commissions. Who isn't used to the same types of chairs, pews, hangings, candlesticks and other liturgical apparatus present in so many churches nowadays?

But if there is a shape (or a pattern) for the liturgical space, then instead of rigid regulations and limited furnishing options, it could be a *tabula rasa* where the worshipping community could experiment and arrive to an environment that reflects the principles of liturgical reforms, as long as it followed a pattern based on the received tradition of the Church.

And what would this basic pattern (the shape of the liturgical space) be? Gordon Lathrop delineates an ecumenical pattern or *ordo* of worship which is also a pattern of meaning. His proposal of an *ordo* encompasses the following patterns:

- The *ordo* of seven days and the eighth day<sup>12</sup>
- The *ordo* of Word and Table<sup>13</sup>
- The *ordo* of praise and beseeching<sup>14</sup>
- The *ordo* of teaching and bath<sup>15</sup>
- The *ordo* of the year and Pascha<sup>16</sup>

Lathrop's summarization of the *ordo* is based a great deal on Justin Martyr's Apologies, but does not emphasize a specific period of the Early Church by implying the adoption of a specific rite or text. In fact, the beauty of Lathrop's pattern lies on the simplicity it has. By going back to

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<sup>11</sup> Chapter V of the General Instruction for the Roman Missal deals with proper sanctuary arrangement in a Roman Catholic context. Other churches have their own manuals and guidelines, which are somewhat compatible with their Roman Catholic counterpart.

<sup>12</sup> LATHROP, Gordon. *Holy things: a liturgical theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993, p. 36.

<sup>13</sup> LATHROP, 1993, p. 43.

<sup>14</sup> LATHROP, 1993, p. 55.

<sup>15</sup> LATHROP, 1993, p. 59.

<sup>16</sup> LATHROP, 1993, p. 68.

one of the most ancient non-Biblical Christian documents, he proposes a very elegant approach to the ordo: one that is fully compatible with the liturgies most Christian bodies continue to follow despite so many textual and ritual differences.

The shape of the liturgical space must be, therefore, one that can be adapted to this simple ordo, and to its manifold juxtapositions (a term Lathrop himself is very fond of). By focusing on the ordo, we are able to draw a basic theology of a liturgical space which takes worship to its core: the very center of who we are. In other words, a space suitable for the *homo adorans*<sup>17</sup> (a term coined by Schmemmann). It should allow:

- 1) Daily prayer whenever possible, and weekly Christ-centered Eucharistic worship at all times, on the eighth day. This provides the worshipping community with the possibility of a communal weekly celebration of the resurrection of the Lord and the beginning of a new creation and its eschatological implications. The liturgical space, therefore, needs to be open for Holy Eucharist every Sunday, and should be open for daily worship (according to the community's needs) on other days.
- 2) Word juxtaposed with Table. Reading, listening, sharing the Word of God (through music, poetry, preaching and any other culturally appropriate forms) as a synagogue-like gathering juxtaposed with setting out food, giving thanks, making Eucharist, sending to the absent and showing concern with the poor. And all of that should be done with a renewed sense of synagogue-like participation (since through Baptism we are all made full members of the Body of Christ). The liturgical space, therefore, should have room for word sharing, a table for the Holy Meal and be adapted for Mission by being truly welcoming to all, including the poor and disenfranchised.
- 3) Offering thanksgiving for blessings and begging God for current needs of the world. The liturgical space, therefore, should be adapted to allow expressions of praise and also to better serve those in need who surround the worshipping community.

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<sup>17</sup> FAGERBERG, David W. *Theologia Prima*. S. 1.: Hillenbrand Books, 2012, p. 85.

- 4) Teaching juxtaposed to Bath. Sharing the message of Christ's everlasting love, introducing people to this transforming faith, welcoming them into the body of Christ through Baptism and offering, again, Holy Meal. The liturgical space, therefore, must be used for Christian education and outreach, should have a font, basin or pool for Bath and, again, a table for the Holy Meal.
- 5) A year-round cycle of liturgical events, which are centered upon the Pascha, the victory of life over death and the good news that Christ is risen. The liturgical space, therefore, should be adapted to better recapitulate the many stories and events expressed in liturgical texts, Word and Table throughout the Christian year, both in a didactical and eschatological way.

This list would be enough if it weren't for the fact it is still *theologia secunda* (secondary liturgical theology). It is based on a set of conceptions proposed by liturgical theologians! Fagerberg reminds us that the "starting point for liturgical theology must be real liturgies"<sup>18</sup> and that primary liturgical theology is done by the liturgical community (*theologia prima*). Therefore, *lex orandi* empowers the people of God to do *theologia prima*. *Lex orandi* precedes *lex credendi*<sup>19</sup>.

Fagerberg reminds us of Aidan Kavanagh's example of Mrs. Murphy to make some very important assumptions. Above all, primary theologians (i.e. the assembly) are empowered by the Holy Spirit and capacitated to distinguish "icon from secular art, symbol from sign, mystagogy from allegory or liturgical gesture from pontifical showmanship"<sup>20</sup>. In terms of patterns for liturgical spaces, this means that items one through five set the background (*theologia secunda*) for *theologia prima* to happen. The basic patterns inherited from Tradition (week cycles, yearly cycles, praise, beseeching, Word, Table, Bath) ought to be layered with the work of those who do primary liturgical theology, for they are capacitated by the Spirit to discern what is holy. This suggests a 6<sup>th</sup> and final principle to the shape of the liturgical space:

<sup>18</sup> FAGERBERG, 2012, p. 40.

<sup>19</sup> FAGERBERG, 2012, p. 67.

<sup>20</sup> FAGERBERG, 2012, p. 151.

- 1) The liturgical space must be a place where God's people, in the power of the Holy Spirit, will fully participate in setting up, renovating, furnishing, worshipping, planning and other possible actions. It must be a place where primary theology is done in the fullest sense of the word.

Notice that none of the six basic principles for this proposed theology of the worship space is concerned about where specific furniture will go, how the space will be divided, where ministers will seat, what kind of sacred art will it have or how ritual will be performed. This would be up to the people who are doing primary theology and who are empowered by the life-giving Spirit to discern what best glorifies God and serves God's creation.

But this work of empowered primary theology can only be done if the assembly sees the liturgical space as an integral part of their lives. In other words, it must "feel like home". Therefore, after defining basic theological patterns for the shape for the liturgical space, we will now examine how it must function as a house for the people of God.

### ***A house of prayer for all people***

One of the earliest surviving examples of a house church is the one found in the ruins of Dura Europos. If it were possible for us to go back in time and visit it in its own urban context, most likely it would be unimpressive from the outside. It was part of a complex of small buildings, houses and shops, like many other early Christian worship spaces. David Power reminds that Christians did not stand out by reason of their places of worship, which were usually hidden within the cultural mass. What made them truly distinctive was what went on inside them<sup>21</sup>.

The house church in Dura Europos was simply a space available to early Christians and fully customized by them on the inside, mostly due to the circumstances they faced (informality and persecution, for

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<sup>21</sup> POWER, David Noel. *Sacrament: the language of God's giving*. New York: Crossroads, 1999, p. 184.

example). It was adapted to their needs as a worshipping community. It fulfilled the basic purposes of Word, Table and Bath, and was home to their community. Without romanticizing the Early Church, it is possible to say that such house churches were successful in their own way. Otherwise, we would not be here!

Power continues his analysis on spaces of worship by describing the different role medieval cathedrals had. They were visually the center of old cities, and stood as prominent to their own cultural setting. Even small country churches were built atop a hill, so that they would be seen as a sacramental presence sanctifying their surroundings. This kind of perspective was maintained for most of the following centuries, up to the mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century, when inner-city churches were dwarfed by skyscrapers and apartment complexes.

But the placement within the urban (or rural) scenario was not the only change church buildings were submitted to. Grand sanctuaries were designed as a way of bringing a perception of the Holy to worshippers<sup>22</sup>. Buildings were erected with a cosmic plan, devising a cosmic hierarchy between earth and heaven, which invariably led to a spatial hierarchy within them, represented by steps, walls and screens.

André Biéler, writing from a Reformed perspective, offers some insights on the evolution of worship spaces as well. He notices that the primitive community often followed the synagogal pattern of worship<sup>23</sup> (i.e. a gathering around the readers, prophets and the Holy Table), in a single room<sup>24</sup>. Gradually, however, a revival of liturgical customs inherited from ancient pagan services and ritual Temple Judaism led to two typical manifestations of natural religion: the veneration of certain places and objects and the attribution of ritual privileges to a priesthood. These, among other reasons, led to a disappearance of the community's part in worship and reduced the brotherhood/sisterhood view Christians had of themselves.

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<sup>22</sup> POWER, 1999, p. 186.

<sup>23</sup> BIÉLER, André. *Architecture in worship: the Christian place of worship*. Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1965, p. 21-22.

<sup>24</sup> I would add that baptistries could be placed in another room or outside structure, but Biéler's main point still stands: people would gather in a single room for the main liturgical actions.

In terms of how liturgical spaces were organized, this led to a hierarchization of the worship space based on pre-assigned roles. The Table was gradually confined to a “Holy of Holies”, priests and other ministers were assigned specific seating and buildings became increasingly segregated into well-defined areas (with all sorts of visible barriers between them). What was originally Holy (as in “set apart for worship”) became holy (as in “unreachable for those who do not belong to the priestly chaste”). In Biéler’s words, “there was no longer a community of believers conducting their own worship. Instead, there was a crowd who watched the priests perform the service.”<sup>25</sup> The adoption of the Roman Basilica for public services borrowed a style which already implied the segregation of the assembly based on governmental roles. Architectural styles which followed it preserved and enhanced such spatial divisions, and were endorsed by the prevailing symbolic and religious notions of their era<sup>26</sup>. This echoes Biéler’s criticism of architectural changes church buildings suffered after the Protestant Reformation. Protestant churches did not reduce segregation in worship. They merely rearranged sanctuaries according to their new religious symbolic notion, but kept the vices of earlier models, with the placement of special pews for civil and religious authorities and the enshrinement of the pulpit as an unreachable focus point for worshippers.

It is very clear that the internal design of Christian churches took a course which related their form to specific theological concepts and even to a completely different worldview, but did worship spaces keep the sense of “houses of worship”? Or did increasing segregation and confusion over the meaning of holy objects contribute to change how Christians viewed themselves and, ultimately, God? I sustain that the latter is true. Architecture and form are integral to the worship experience<sup>27</sup>. Any physical blockages and spatial distinctions between different classes of Christians, coupled with a view of holy objects as magical and unreachable have immediate consequences on how rites are performed,

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<sup>25</sup> BIÉLER, André. *Architecture in worship: the Christian place of worship*. Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1965, p. 43.

<sup>26</sup> POWER, 1999, p. 186.

<sup>27</sup> POWER, 1999, p. 206.

understood and appropriated. If believers have a limited reach of action, being confined to a corner of the liturgical space, then, it loses the fundamental meaning of a “house” of worship, for they will probably not treat it as their *home*.

Curiously, a lot of the reasoning behind an internal geography of church buildings relies on the divisions that once existed in the Temple of Jerusalem. But this is indeed a rather weak argument, if we take into account the amount of scriptural references that seem to emphasize that Jesus Christ came to put an end to such hierarchical divisions. In fact, in John 2:19, Jesus makes the point he would *destroy* the Temple and raise it up anew! Any reference to the Temple of Jerusalem as a guide for church design must take into account the eschatological implications of the new Temple Jesus came to build.

This is why we must focus not on the depiction of the ancient Temple, but on the prophetic vision of a new Temple found in Isaiah 56. It is a place where both foreigners and natives are invited, where a banquet takes place (nobody is hungry or needy) and where all have access to the Altar of God. Just like the people in Dura Europos and other early Church communities adapted different kinds of buildings for common gatherings, Christians nowadays need to adapt church structures to spaces that impose no segregations thus contradicting a logic of inequality found in the world around them. And perhaps it is time to let go of ancient and costly buildings that are not fit for mission and adapt to structures that may be more significant to the place Christianity has in contemporary world.

### **The *house as stage* and the roles it engenders**

We want to feel at home at church, but we do not want church to look *just like home*. In fact, it is desirable to avoid an extreme sense of coziness in the church experience, for the Christian message often asks us tough questions. There is, in fact, a dramatic side to the Christian story and it is important to take into account the theatrical aspect worship has.

Central to the understanding of Christianity as drama is the thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar. It is nearly impossible to resume the gist of

his theological dramatic theory in a few words, but for the purpose of this article, some key points could be signalized<sup>28</sup>. Christ is *one* of the actors of the world drama (albeit the chief one). God sets up a stage for us from the beginning of times. Unlike in other religious scenarios, we are not a passive audience. Through Christ's incarnation, we are made co-actors of this theo-drama. The Church's role in this play is to be the germ of the Kingdom of God, both in a missionary and sacramental way.

William Seth Adams also mentions another useful picture of the liturgical event as theater, provided by Soren Kierkegaard. "... the actors are the people gathered, the prompter is the one who presides ... and who is the audience? God, of course."<sup>29</sup>

A third concept, this time drawn from the Social Sciences, comes from Erving Goffman, who understood relationships between human beings as a play. According to Goffman, every human being performs in society according to the role s/he finds acceptable. Different spaces (work, home, school, church, etc.) are stages for different kinds of performances. In order to function properly as an actor in society, one must learn the proper role for each situation.

Whether we like it or not, the worship space is one among several different stages we act in our ordinary lives. But if we take Balthasar's theo-drama seriously, we must understand ourselves as actors of a major play – in which Christ is the apex. Consequently, the whole liturgical space is the stage, and the entire assembly is part of this drama. This contradicts the layout so many churches still possess these days, with seat arrangements that resemble theaters and raised platforms for what are considered the main liturgical actions (preaching and the sacraments). But the whole liturgical action is taking place in the entire worship space!

We have already dealt with how different kinds of obstacles reduce the sense of a common house for all worshippers and instill differences among the people of God which are contrary to the Gospel's prophetic project. Now we realize they also push people out of the major drama of

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<sup>28</sup> BALTHASAR, Hans Urs von. *Theo-drama: Theological dramatic theory*, volume 3: The dramatis personae, the person of Christ. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992, p. 47-70.

<sup>29</sup> ADAMS, William Seth. *Shaped by images: one who presides*. New York: Church Hymnal Corp., 1995, p. 13.

their lives – the great story of our salvation – and place them in a passive spectator role. This has led to so many dreadful cases of churches where clergy act much more as talk show hosts or media presenters. If the Sacrament is celebrated from a stage far apart from the people, who are placed in audience-like seating, then it is possible to say that while receiving the sacrament does confer grace, most people miss the opportunity of greater participation in worship. It is a denial of the Body of Christ as *corpus verum*, as de Lubac has indicated.

When the members of the body of Christ gathered in worship (the assembly) are conscious of their place in this mystical play, they can perform the role they were created to fulfill. Worship should allow people to let go of predefined roles they bring from different scenarios and stages of society, be renewed through Christ and go back to the world transformed, in the power of the Spirit, in order to be a seed of the Kingdom. Liturgical texts, ritual and music play are central to the instilment of this concept. So is the arrangement of the liturgical space.

And what is the scenario of this stage? Once again, Power reminds us of the power of imagery used in worship<sup>30</sup>. If the Church is truly a stage, it must be embellished with a background that draws people closer to God and to their role in this play. Certainly, a lot of different genres of sacred art have adorned our worship spaces. But if they are meant to be an effective scenario to this holy stage, they must possess an iconic quality. In an era of a constant flux of death-giving images, imagery used for worship must have a timeless quality which draws people to central elements of their faith and brings their attention to the Sacraments and to their role in active participation. And they do not need to be exhibited year-round. There can be seasonal changes and arrangements. A play has several acts. A stage has several backgrounds.

There is plenty of room for inculturation as well when it comes to setting up the liturgical stage as an iconic scenario<sup>31</sup>. The stage upon which the Christian drama is enacted and lived through worship is considerably enriched when its background is enhanced by visual elements

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<sup>30</sup> POWER, 1999, p. 190-195.

<sup>31</sup> CHUPUNGCO, Anscar. J. *Handbook for liturgical studies. Volume II*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998, p. 337-340.

appropriated to its specific cultural context. It conveys a message that the surrounding culture can be transformed and changed through the Gospel, and at the same time reminds the faithful people that their mission is also carried out in the world.

### **The house/stage as heavenly place and a foretaste of the Kingdom**

Both metaphors of the liturgical space as house and stage have brought some insights on how to implement the concise theology of the worship space previously proposed. However, the immanence of communal worship that is fully participatory must be coupled with a sense of transcendence. In other words, the liturgical space should be a house of prayer and a stage for the Christian drama, but those should have a *heavenly* aspect too.

Hans Boersma criticizes the loss of a sense of heavenly participation in the being of God after the high middle ages. He echoes de Lubac and other *Nouvelle Théologie* writers in pointing out gradual dichotomies between sacrament and reality that made room for the naturalism of the world. According to him, when distinct orders (natural and supernatural) are separated, the basic implication is that the one can pursue its ends without any participation in the other.<sup>32</sup> Not even the Reformation was capable of reweaving this divide. It was too drenched in Modernity to see beyond it.

Following Boersma's lead, one can conclude that our world must be reinfused again with a sacramental ontology, which involves *participating* in the being of God. Participation is what we have been discussing previously, by applying to the worship space the concepts of *house* and *stage*, that invite worshippers to be *family members* and *actors* of a Christological play. But how do those become heavenly? Through a sacramental ontology.

Bringing a few concepts from Louis-Marie Chauvet to this discussion, the sanctuary must be a heavenly place that affirms the mediation

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<sup>32</sup> BOERSMA, Hans. *Heavenly participation: the weaving of a sacramental tapestry*. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2011, p. 53-66.

of the Church through Scripture, Sacraments and Ethics<sup>33</sup> while empowering the celebrating assembly to realize it is the primary locus of the Church (and consequently, the chief mediation with God in Christ).<sup>34</sup> This is greatly facilitated when there is plenty of room for *symbolic exchanges* to occur<sup>35</sup> in both verbal and non-verbal communication.

And symbolic exchanges are more prone to occur if people are able to grasp liturgy with all their senses. If the presider is empowered by the Church and by the Holy Spirit to bless and pray on behalf of the celebrating assembly, then the same assembly must be in a position to join the leader according to their communal role and to specific roles of each individual. This reinforces the concept (already mentioned) that there must be no barriers that isolate groups of people in the liturgical space.

Secondly, I have argued before that imagery in worship should be “lived, examined, witnessed, prayed for, prayed with and connected with gestures, acts, sounds, colors, and full participation in multisensorial worship which draws the people of God towards the Most Holy One.”<sup>36</sup> This same principle should apply to the worship space as well, when it comes to sacred art, furniture, lighting and other “scenario elements”. All of them should have a symbolic layer that help people connect to the Divine.

### **So where do we go now?**

Before coming to the final conclusions, I would like to offer a few criticisms of two common church designs<sup>37</sup>. Figure 1 shows a typical ancient building adapted to certain principles of the liturgical reform.

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<sup>33</sup> CHAUVET, Louis-Marie. *The sacraments: the Word of God at the mercy of the body*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001, 25-26.

<sup>34</sup> CHAUVET, 2001, p. 34-39.

<sup>35</sup> CHAUVET, 2001, p. 121.

<sup>36</sup> COELHO, Luiz. “A visual Gospel: imagery as Mission.” In: *Life-widening mission: global perspectives from the Anglican Communion*. Edited by Cathy Ross. Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2012, p. 128.

<sup>37</sup> This is not based on any scientific evidence, but in my experience as a liturgical design consultant over the course of the years, having visited many church buildings in different cities and countries.

Figure 2 shows a modern liturgical space, already built at a time liturgical reform was the principle to be followed.

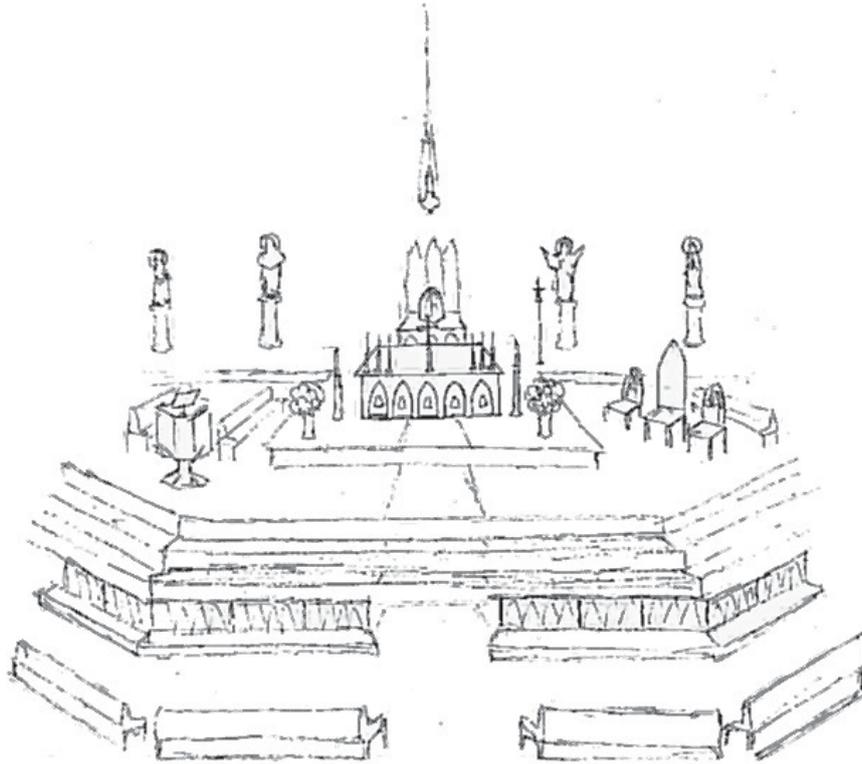


Fig. 1 – A more traditional design for a liturgical space

What's wrong with worship space number 1? I would argue that it enhances the worst aspects of pre-20<sup>th</sup> century worship and the worst side-effects of liturgical reform. Yet, it is the reality of many of our churches. First of all, it maintained all possible spatial divisions that isolate ministers from the rest of the assembly, thus limiting physically worshippers' participation. Steps, communion kneelers and platforms serve as barriers that put people "in their proper places" and create a symbolic divide between two different groups of people. Presider and assistant chairs are exaggerated and perpetuate hierarchical divisions which should be nuanced. The amount of art and decorative elements found around the altar create a visual tension that de-focuses people from the main liturgical action and

limit the stage to the “altar area”, with the east wall as its scenario. On top of that, by merely reducing renovations to an added platform and a free-standing altar, it allows one terrible outcome of *versus populum* celebration: priests without much modesty could easily take advantage of limiting aspects of worship space design to enhance their own authority over the rest of the assembly. One single person, facing the rest, separated by steps and an altar and in the middle of a line of sight that connects the altar and the tabernacle: not a very useful symbolic reference. This kind of liturgical design seemed to be a common pattern among church communities which inherited old church buildings and did little renovations in order to adapt to some principles of liturgical reform, but the appalling news is that this blended style has had a resurgence recently, with some architectural firms designing brand new church buildings according to such standards. This seems to be the ideal liturgical design for groups such as Adoremus and the New Liturgical Movement.

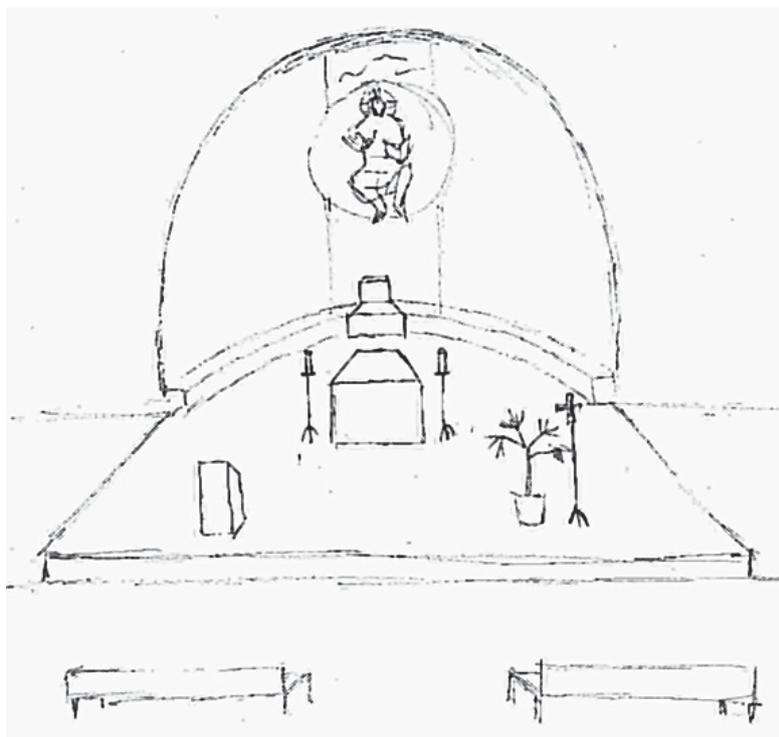


Fig. 2 – A typical contemporary design for a liturgical space

And what's wrong with space number 2? It follows a pattern of renovations and new designs found in many churches adapted for worship or built after liturgical renewal started. It is the preferred style for liturgical designers such as Cláudio Pastro and Richard Giles. It emphasizes simplicity and a clearly visible connection with the early church. In a certain way, it gets many principles of liturgical reform right, by reducing the amount of furniture and devotional objects to a minimum that clearly reminds us of Lathrop's ordo and the first five principles of a liturgical space theology I proposed. It also proposes a clear theology of beauty, which relies a lot on Balthasar's thoughts about God as Divine beauty.

But after a few decades, this style has become too rigid and defined a strict vernacular of its own. In fact, Pastro is very picky about some of his choices. The altar/table must be cubic<sup>38</sup> (which, in his opinion, resembles an altar of sacrifice better). The altar, ambo and presider's chair must be made out of the same stone<sup>39</sup>, emphasizing a connection that symbolically raises the priest to an undesirable position of power. Giles' approach to renovations also follows the same pattern of adding an enhanced throne for the presider<sup>40</sup>. Why do we keep using the same Imperial metaphors in our worship space? We must keep in mind ancient basilicas suited a well-defined civic role for the Roman Empire. The one who sat on the throne was a judge, with secular power. The insistence on placing presider chairs that resemble thrones maintains one of the worst aspects we inherited from Roman civic buildings. When we merely replicate it, we fall prey to an idealization of Early Church architectural patterns without adapting them to sincere liturgical criticism.

Also, both Pastro and Giles insist on a raised platform for the altar, which might be necessary in large buildings but not really useful in small church buildings at a time good sound systems are widely available. If the liturgical space is ample and not cluttered, the altar will be clearly visible from afar without the need of a platform. Also, keeping it on the same level of everything else emphasizes the whole worship space as a

<sup>38</sup> PASTRO, Cláudio. *O Deus da beleza: educação através da beleza*. São Paulo: Paulinas, 2012, p. 94.

<sup>39</sup> PASTRO, 2012, p. 97-99.

<sup>40</sup> GILES, Richard. *Re-pitching the tent: re-ordering the church building for worship and mission*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004, p. 195.

stage, levels the assembly horizontally as equal children of God and suits practical inclusive purposes, such as allowing people with disabilities to serve at the altar.

Finally, it seems that Byzantine-like iconography has become the preferred artistic style for new churches and church renovations. This can be seen in Taizé-inspired communities, in Neo-Catechumenate churches and even in ancient cathedrals readapted for liturgical renewal. I would argue traditional icons are layered with dense symbolic meaning and are indeed great choices when it comes to sacred imagery, but enhancing them to a unique and desirable style contradicts the principle of inculturation in worship. Pastro even points out that some sorts of sacred images are of a low, devotional piety level, and should not be added to worship spaces<sup>41</sup>. But will a contemporary version of a 4<sup>th</sup> Century church with a central apse icon and plain white walls suit all cultural sensibilities? I believe not.

At this point, I believe it is fair to propose some practical actions that I believe flow out of the six theological principles and two metaphors (heavenly house, heavenly stage) I proposed earlier:

- The ordo requires Word, Table and Bath. Altar/tables, lecterns and fonts can be of any material, as long as they are dignifying and culturally appropriate. They must emphasize theological sacramental concepts pertaining to different rites, but there is no need to define their specific shape and form according to specific standards that do not match local cultural principles. Otherwise, the worship space would not feel like their house.
- It is about time to get done with thrones and other imperial references to the role of the presider. If the presider is one among many (Adams) and if the assembly is the primary locus of the Church (Chauvet), then the presider must be seated on the same kind of general seating provided for all, and as close to the rest of the assembly as possible.
- This is greatly facilitated when there are individual chairs for each person, but if pews are the only kind of seating available, then let

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<sup>41</sup> PASTRO, Paulinas, 2012, p. 84-85.

the presider and other ministers sit on discrete chairs made out of the same material.

- I do not intend to argue that a specific liturgical space layout is the best (such as a circular pattern, a monastic arrangement or east-facing seating). But I argue that, in order to better suit the theological principle of a space that makes room for thoughtful discussions in synagogue-like patterns (Word), teaching that allows sharing of experiences, and sincere praise and beseeching, seating must not be cluttered, there must be ways for all to see and be seen, and the assembly must be as close to where main liturgical actions take place (Table, Word, Bath). Circular and monastic patterns seem to work best in that regard.
- In most spaces, raised platforms and other barriers that create well defined borders between the altar/table, presider seating and other pieces of furniture are not at all necessary. A space where all sacred furniture is placed on the same level aligns all the people of God horizontally and suits better the metaphor of a common room of a holy house and a single stage of Christ's play.
- With regards to the liturgical East, it is past time to educate the people that the Altar/Table is the new East, and not a specific corner of the worship space. Perhaps the idea of a hanging cross over it could implement this better.
- Sacred imagery should have symbolic meaning but also be culturally sensitive. There's no "high" or "low" sacred art. There is sacred art. If it connects the faithful with God, then it suits the purpose it was made for. Popular devotional imagery that is Gospel centered should be encouraged regardless of its style or cultural background. There's plenty of room for inculturation in that regard.
- The liturgical space should vary according to the Christian year and according to days of the Christian year. In fact, the more versatile a worship space is, the more it can be adapted to different needs. Therefore, there's no reason why the Altar/Table, the font, the lectern, seating and imagery could not be creatively rearranged in order to better emphasize the main motifs of each season.

- Whenever possible, the worship space should be multipurpose. There is a pattern of seven days (and an eighth day) of worship that takes place in our church buildings, but Christian communities must embrace the mission they are called to do with the buildings that were entrusted to them, other than merely keeping them open when a service is happening. Therefore, worship spaces must be easily adapted to suit other purposes, such as service and education.

Finally, all decisions must be endorsed and guided by the local community. Giles provides good advice on how local communities could hire architects and consultants.<sup>42</sup> I would note, however, that in many cases this is not true and clergy and a few lay leaders end up being the ones who guide and commission architects, designers and artists. I insist that the ones who worship in that space, and call it home, are the ones who should be in charge of deciding how it should look like. Clergy and lay liturgists have an important task in terms of theological education so liturgical spaces are built or reordered in order to reflect more fully the Kingdom of God. But whenever possible, the work of artists, architects and builders should be sought from within the community. One great example of such commitment was found in Grace Episcopal Church, Allentown, PA, where the whole community joined in turning its liturgical space into a suitable place for liturgy and mission<sup>43</sup>.

## Conclusion

This paper addressed the importance of bold liturgical space renewal that suits the work that has been carried out since the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in terms of active participation of the whole body of Christ in worship. It intends to shed some light on what a sacred place should be: a place which implies heavenly participation, i.e. a place that resembles Heaven

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<sup>42</sup> GILES, 2004, p. 221-224.

<sup>43</sup> MALLOY, Patrick. "Grace in the City: Urban Ministry in the New Normal". *Anglican Theological Review* 92.4, 2010, p. 771-773.

as much as possible. In that regard, two important analogies were addressed: worship space as a heavenly house and worship space as a heavenly stage. The concept of liturgical space as a house of prayer, for the family of God, reclaims the original importance of house churches where people could freely gather around liturgical actions and remind them that worship is meant to be a family feast and a gathering of the people of God. The idea of liturgical space as holy stage emphasizes the theatricality of worship while, at the same time, reminds us that the stage where the liturgical action takes place should be the proper venue for people to undress the pre-assigned roles they are given by society and fully embody the *jeux de rôle* they were created to fulfill, liberating themselves to truly be who they were meant to be as children of God.

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