



The high altar of the Basilica of St. John Lateran in Rome, Italy by Arnolfo di Cambio (1369). Pope Saint Sylvester (314–335), patron of the basilica, is said to have been the first to require stone altars.

CHAPTER 2

The Altar as the Center of the Church: Principles of Design¹

A church is the place where the Christian community is gathered to hear the word of God, to offer prayers of intercession and praise to God, and above all to celebrate the holy mysteries; and it is the place where the holy sacrament of the Eucharist is kept. Thus it stands as a special kind of image of the Church itself, which is God’s temple built from living stones.

Decree from the Congregation for Sacraments and Divine Worship, Prot. No. CD 300/77

AS WE ENTER THE THIRD MILLENNIUM, it is appropriate to look back on the architecture of the past millennium, including the architecture of this past century. Considering how previous generations have honored Christ’s birth

through material construction, we must ask for this generation: How shall we then build?

Focusing on the Catholic architecture constructed since the Second World War, we are struck by the great change that has taken place in our portrayal of the sacred. I am speaking of the abstract and unrecognizable forms, minimalist spaces, unnatural materials, and lack of figurative sacred art that describe the majority of our churches

1. Originally published as “The Altar as the Center of the Church,” in E. Carr, ed., *Architettura e arti per la liturgia: atti del V Congresso internazionale di liturgia, Roma, Pontificio Istituto liturgico, 12–15 ottobre 1999*, (Roma: Centro studi S. Anselmo, 2001) 169–190. Reprinted with permission.



“C’è poco senso del sacro nelle nuove chiese.” Pope John Paul II uttered these words after visiting the Church of San Mattia in the Monte Sacro Alto neighborhood of Rome, Italy designed by Ignazio Breccia (1969).

built since 1945. For some, Modernist architecture is seen as the embodiment of the Spirit of Vatican II, symbolizing the necessary renewal of the Church and her liturgy. To others, these churches are seen as anti-traditional, symbolizing all that was wrong with the Second Vatican Council. Neither view seems to sufficiently consider the facts. To the student of architectural history, the architecture built by the Catholic Church during the past fifty years does not seem to be all that different from secular trends. In fact, rather than being the architecture called for by the fathers of the Second Vatican Council, the embrace of Modernism by the Church was simply an adoption of contemporary architectural expression.

“C’è poco senso del sacro nelle nuove chiese”—There is little sense of the sacred in the new churches.² Many Catholics have thought or said this in recent decades, but it took the Holy Father, John Paul II, to bring the issue to the fore after his visit to a church in the periphery of Rome in 1999. This comment from John Paul II caused a bit of a stir in the Italian media, and Cardinal Ruini reiterated the Pope’s concerns in his own addresses to architects and artists. I would suggest that some of the reasons for the lack of the sacred in our modern churches are the absence of unity, harmony, beauty, tradition, symbols, and recognizable imagery. Something has been lost that needs to be regained.

But in regaining aspects of liturgical architecture, it is too easy to merely produce a banal traditionalism which is little better than the strident iconoclasm of Modernism.

2. Comment by Pope John Paul II at his parochial visit to San Mattia on March 14, 1999.

Is there a conceptual framework that will allow us to make educated judgments about the design and renovation of the *domus Dei*? One way is by considering the nature of the holy liturgy and the centrality of the altar in the celebration. In order to design a beautiful church, we should begin with a beautiful altar.

SIGN OF CHRIST AND FOCUS OF THE LITURGY

Often when I describe a church building, I begin with the exterior and proceed into the nave toward the sanctuary, because this is the way that we experience a church. But another way of thinking about the church, theologically as well as architecturally, is to begin with the church’s *raison d’être*, the holy altar, and allow the building to grow out from there. If we design a material altar which adequately portrays its meaning in our faith, and then allow the rest of the church to harmonize with the altar, we may be able to return the sense of the sacred—the absence of which Pope John Paul II noted above—to our modern churches.



Symbolically we should build the altar first and work out from there. The Tomb of St. Catherine of Siena under the high altar of the Basilica of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva in Rome, Italy.

Symbolically, we should build the altar first and work out from there. I would suggest that we are less likely to put up with low-quality materials, horizontal proportions, abstract figures, and vacuous sanctuaries if we come to grips with the profound meaning of the altar and allow it to influence our design of the church. One can, in a sense, design the church from inside out. However, I do not mean that in a church “form follows function;” a church is more than a building designed to

efficiently celebrate the Mass. It has only been in the twentieth century that people have believed that churches are successful only if they meet functional criteria in the same way as in a manufacturing plant.

There is no place set apart for celebrating the liturgy unless it has an altar. From earliest times the altar has been the hierarchical center of the church, the focus of the liturgy and a representation of Christ. In the earliest examples of churches, such as at Dura-Europos in Asia Minor, we find a room with an altar table. The *Decree from the Congregation for Sacraments and Divine Worship, Prot. No. CD 300/77* put it this way: “the altar of a church . . . stands as a sign of Christ himself, who is the priest, the victim, and the altar of his own sacrifice.”³ The altar can also be seen to symbolize the table of the Last Supper, the altar of the Temple in Jerusalem, the cross of Calvary, the tomb of Christ’s burial and Resurrection, and the altar in heaven.⁴ The design and construction of the altar should embody meal and sacrifice as well as birth and resurrection. One could combine a block-like altar with a table of columns, or combine a tomb with a crib. And the design of the whole church, if we are being consistent, will aid in this understanding of the altar through its planning and iconography.

The British author Paul Johnson would have it that American Catholics are simply Calvinists who go to Mass. In a time when there is great misunderstanding of the meaning of the Mass and belief in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, it is important that we re-emphasize the Church’s teaching through the medium of beautiful liturgy and a sacramental architecture. It is important also that we re-appropriate the meaning of the altar and how it is represented. During the Counter-Reformation, the Protestant denial of the Real Presence of the Eucharist led the Catholic Church to respond by creating large and beautiful tabernacles, joining them with

3. *Decree from the Congregation for Sacraments and Divine Worship, Prot. No. CD 300/77* From Dedication of Church and Altar “And the altar of a church, where the holy people of God gathers to take part in the Lord’s sacrifice and to be refreshed by the heavenly meal, stands as a sign of Christ himself, who is the priest, the victim, and the altar of his own sacrifice.” p. 96.

4. This last is clearly seen in the text of Eucharistic Prayer I: “In humble prayer we ask you, almighty God: / command that these gifts be borne / by the hands of your holy Angel / to your altar on high / in the sight of your divine majesty . . .” *The Roman Missal, English Translation According to the Third Typical Edition, For Use in the Dioceses of the United States of America, Approved by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and Confirmed by the Apostolic See, trans. International Commission on English in the Liturgy Corporation (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2011), Order of Mass, 94.*



In “The Mass at Bolsena” by Raphael, a Bohemian priest who doubts the Real Presence celebrates mass and the host begins to bleed. Inspired by this miracle, Pope Urban IV instituted the Feast of Corpus Christi the following year, in 1264.

the altar, and employing biblical and Christian imagery supporting the doctrine within spacious churches. One thinks particularly of Raphael’s paintings of the *Disputa del Sacramento* and the *Miracle at Bolsena* in the Vatican, or Leonardo da Vinci’s *Last Supper* in Milan. *The Miracle of Saint Gregory the Great* by Andrea Sacchi over the altar of St. Gregory in St. Peter’s Basilica is another excellent example. We must create the equivalent art and architecture for our time, when the average Catholic often doubts the efficacy of the sacraments.

DESIGNING A HOLY AND BEAUTIFUL ALTAR

Pope John Paul II has spoken of treating holy objects with holy respect.⁵ The most holy object in a church, the altar, which is also the focus of the Mass, deserves the greatest attention to design and the greatest relative expenditure. It should be constructed with the finest materials possible, and have a most elegant and beautiful design. The altar also needs to be the most permanent part of the church, with its own foundations, and receives its own separate consecration.

The altar is the table on which the priest commemorates and joins us to Christ’s sacrifice. It is a most holy place on which mere bread and wine are placed, that become Christ’s Body and Blood. An altar on which the

5. See Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Vicesimus Quintus Annus*, On the 25th Anniversary of the Promulgation of the Conciliar Constitution “*Sacrosanctum Concilium*” on the Sacred Liturgy (1988), 7: “Faith in this presence of the Lord involves an outward sign of respect towards the church, the holy place in which God manifests himself in mystery (see Ex 3:5), especially during the celebration of the sacraments: holy things must always be treated in a holy manner.”

unbloody sacrifice of the Mass is presented is a most holy object. That is why we have rules about how to honor, preserve, and take care of the altar. If it were any other table, that is, merely a piece of furnishing, we would not have any concerns about treating it with disrespect. We give respect to other material objects—such as national flags—which are mere symbols. How much greater should our care for the altar of sacrifice be?



The Church of Santa Maria in Marco de Canaveses, Portugal by award winning architect Alvaro Siza (1996) with its minimalist altar.

There are infinite ways to design a holy and beautiful altar, always seeking to portray its liturgical meaning. The use of fine bronze or cast iron, beautifully carved wood, or various stones may all be appropriate. In all cases the Church has a longstanding preference for stone, especially for the *mensa* or top. Pope St. Sylvester (314–335), who was the patron of St. John Lateran, is said to be the first to have made stone altars obligatory. Saint John Chrysostom writes that “this altar is an object of wonder: by nature it is stone, but it is made holy when it receives the body of Christ.”⁶ It is this *mensa* which is anointed at the time of dedication, much like Christ’s body was anointed before his death. Because it is a holy object, we also incense the altar. Just as the altar represents Christ, the stone material represents “Christ the rock” and “the stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone” (Lk 20:17; Ps 118:22).

The question for us is how can the design of the altar (and by extension, the area around it) indicate its sacredness and the honor it deserves? People are quite intelligent about these things, and an altar that is a simple wooden

table or an abstract metal structure will not be approached with the awe and reverence it actually deserves. An abstract or minimalist object may be fine to read a book on, or eat sandwiches off of, but it can never fully hold our attention. Instead, the design of the altar should be such that it portrays the theological truths we wish to express. And if we have a beautiful altar, then should we not make the sanctuary and the church beautiful as well?

The *mensa*, or top stone, receives relics of the saints, following the early tradition of celebrating Mass over the tombs of the martyrs. As the Eucharist is a joining of the Church in Christ’s sacrifice, it can be expressed in the body of a holy man or woman who exhibited that sacrifice in their life. That is, the body or relic of the saint is a material reminder of Christ’s one immemorial sacrifice and bodily death. Saint Ambrose explains that in this way “the triumphant victims may occupy the place where Christ is victim: he, however, who suffered for all, upon the altar; they who have been redeemed by his sufferings, beneath the altar.”⁷ This is why altars have been dedicated to or named after saints, the relics of whom are often placed therein. For instance, in St. Peter’s Basilica, each altar is dedicated to the saint or saints buried underneath. It is imperative for us to recover this cult of the saints and martyrs, especially after the twentieth century, which saw the greatest persecution against Christians since Roman times.

It may be appropriate to employ symbols or iconography on the most important object in the church. The articulation may be simply decorative in a composition, using color, mosaics, and other fine inlaid materials; or it may seek to express the Paschal Mystery through images of the Last Supper, the cross, the Resurrection; or it may even connect the Paschal Mystery to other truths, such as the communion of saints. The altar as an expression of the cross is often iterated by a decorative bas-relief or engraving on the frontal.

Many of the altars we have recently built do not harmonize with the meaning of the liturgy, nor do they live up to the standard set by the past. Some of the features that do not adequately symbolize the altar are an open table for a freestanding altar, crude or cheap materials, an impermanent aesthetic, or a disfigured element.

The size and scale of the altar must be generous enough to be seen by all of the faithful and read as prominent within the church. It should clearly be the most important element in the church and therefore designed

6. Saint John Chrysostom, *Homilia XX in II Cor*, 3: PG 61, 540. Cf. *Dedication of an Altar*, IV 23, pp. 25–26.

7. Saint Ambrose, *Epistula* 22, 13: PL 16, 1023; see Ps. Maximus of Turin, *Sermo*, 78: PL 57, 689–690.

and constructed out of the finest materials such as marble. This will entail a generous allotment of funds—it is not unreasonable to think about the cost of a large marble altar as the equivalent of buying a large SUV or a Lexus.

THE FREESTANDING ALTAR AND THE CIBORIUM

In general the recommendation for new altars to be freestanding—so that the priest may walk around it and may offer Mass *versus populum*—has not been well answered by modern architects and artisans. Instead of making the altar more prominent, we have instead diminished its importance architecturally. A freestanding cantilever or a block of stone approximately three feet tall and five feet wide standing within a sanctuary thirty to forty feet wide gets lost.⁸ For this reason the freestanding altar should include steps to elevate it in importance, which allows the priest to step up to the altar, making him more visible, and allows acolytes and others to walk around it. Along with steps, the altar should be surrounded by other elements that act like picture frames, pedestals, or the architectural equivalent of supporting actors in a play.

In all of the early Christian basilicas, starting with St. John Lateran in Rome, the altar was set within a baldacchino or ciborium, normally four columns and beams that define an aedicule or a holy place. The baldacchino becomes an extension—horizontally and vertically—into the space of the church, helping to enlarge the presence of the altar visually, as well as delimiting an altar precinct. This is particularly advantageous for a stone altar within a spacious sanctuary. A smaller church or chapel can do without the baldacchino, although theologically it can be beneficial.

Usually Corinthian columns hold a type of canopy, symbolizing the tent or tabernacle that sheltered the ark of the covenant in the wilderness. It is interesting that the term for baldacchino in Europe is “ciborium,” which is the

8. In my experience, the dimensions of the altar should be as follows: the height varies between 38 in. and 42 in. (or between 0.96 m and 1 m). A width of 5 to 6 ft. is suitable for the altar of a small chapel (1.5 m); a width of 7 ft. to 8 ft. 6 in. (2.1 m to 2.6 m) is proper for a *mensa* of a church of importance, and makes it possible for at least 3 priests to stand in front of it for concelebration. Of course, in large basilicas or cathedrals, there are sanctuaries which can accommodate altars up to 10 ft. wide (3 m). For instance, the high altar in St. John Lateran is approximately this size, and the high altar at Santa Maria Maggiore is approximately 11 ft. wide (3.4 m). The depth of the altar should be in relation to its length, probably anywhere between 3 and 5 feet (0.9 m to 1.5 m). In general, a *mensa* for an altar attached to a reredos or containing a tabernacle should have between 1 ft. 6 in. to 2 ft. clear (0.5 to 0.6 m).



The altar of the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, Italy surmounted by a porphyry and bronze baldacchino.

same name given to the holy vessel in which the consecrated hosts are placed and reserved within the tabernacle. One way to understand the baldacchino is as the architectural embodiment of the epiclesis of the Mass.⁹ Thus we have the altar, which is Christ, with a baldacchino that symbolizes the Holy Spirit and the Father in heaven. This is often articulated by images of the Holy Spirit on the ceiling of the baldacchino. The hanging or cantilevered tester,¹⁰ usually a canopy without columns, also marks the altar precinct within the sanctuary and is an image of the tent that sheltered the ark of the covenant in the wilderness, and the veil in the Holy of Holies in the Temple.¹¹ The tester or baldacchino create a shrine within the church, becoming an extension of the altar and the tabernacle, which, in a sense the whole church should be.

9. See Gemma Oberto, “Altare e Ciborio, Iconografia e Iconologia,” in *Gli Spazi della Celebrazione Rituale* (Milan: Edizioni O.R., 1984), 109–117.

10. Traditionally the Church has required a canopy in all churches wherein the Eucharist is reserved. Although apparently abrogated by custom before the end of the nineteenth century, this norm was in force for two centuries. See *Ceremoniale Episcoporum* I, xii, 13; xiv, 1 (1886), *Decreta Authentica Congregationis Sacrorum Rituum* (Romae, 1898) no. 1966, 2912, 3525, cf. *Index Generalis*, vol.v, p.35 it is noted s.v. baldachinum “the 1697 and 1846 decrees of the Sacred Congregation of Rites are regarded as abrogated, even in Rome, by contrary custom.” See also J.B. O’Connell, *Church Building and Furnishing* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1955), 188–192.

11. Exodus 10:10–19, Exodus 26:36–38, and 2 *Chronicles* 3:14.



The Church of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, popularly known as the Brompton Oratory, in London, England by Herbert Gribble (1884) with a tester over the altar.

THE SANCTUARY ENFRAMES THE ALTAR

The area surrounding the altar should help to frame it, to create a threshold, and to set it off, while at the same time growing out of it architecturally. One might call this the centripetal force of the altar: it draws us to itself, and at the same time it imparts sacredness to the areas surrounding it, eventually to the whole church. If we have designed a noble and costly altar, it should not be placed in a room that is barren and crude, which would take away from the sacrament and dishonor it. Rather, the altar should have a setting of fine materials and beauty in order to give it due honor. This area, which includes the floor, the walls, and the ceiling, is known as the sanctuary—the “holy place.” The sanctuary can be thought of as the equivalent to the Holy of Holies in the Temple of Solomon. Perhaps the greatest loss of the sense of the sacred in our churches in recent decades has been the disregard or demotion of the sanctuary within the house of God.

The sanctuary is a place set apart from the body of the church. *The General Instruction of the Roman Missal* states that “The sanctuary . . . should be appropriately

marked off from the body of the church either by its being somewhat elevated or by a particular structure and ornamentation.”¹² The sanctuary is the beautiful jewelry box that holds at its center a precious diamond, the altar of Christ. It displays the altar, and at the same time shelters and protects it. This holy place should be generous in size, to allow ample space for the presider, concelebrants, and acolytes. It should also be constructed out of the finest possible materials, so as to reflect its significance and the importance of the altar table that resides within. The Eastern Churches consider the whole sanctuary to be the altar, and therefore only ministers are allowed within it. This concept of the sanctuary’s sacredness, which is so clearly demonstrated by the iconostasis, has also been expressed by churches in the West (though by subtler means during the past four centuries).

The floor of the sanctuary should be designed with a pattern and material that aid the focus on the altar, often by the use of a contrasting color or banding. The use of marble helps to extend the presence of the altar, and to ground it in a holy and permanent realm. In this way the altar affects the space of the church, much like how a boat in a lake creates waves that ripple out until they reach the shore. Other materials are also acceptable, so long as they are durable, natural, and beautiful. The floor could be defined within the church by directionality and clear edges, such as a front and a back threshold, perhaps with low walls or railings. As the most “hierarchical” area within the church, the place of *hier-arch*, or sacred order, the sanctuary should be raised to emphasize its importance. Ascending steps naturally imply that there is something of great importance at the top. A raised sanctuary also has the benefit of allowing the faithful to better see the action of the sanctuary from the nave.

Because of the lessening of the distinctiveness of the sanctuary, we are brought to almost humorous situations in which signs to “keep out” are placed where once people understood not to enter. In a brochure on the chapel designed by Philip Johnson at the University of St. Thomas, visitors are told “Do not enter the raised sanctuary (altar area),” probably because people would not otherwise know from the architectural design. One of the reasons the sense of enclosure is not adequately expressed in many of our new churches has been because of the antagonism toward the altar rail. Even though there is no mandate to remove them or to proscribe their use in new churches,

12. *Roman Missal, General Instruction*, 295. Hereafter GIRM.

they seem to be one of the traditional elements most hated by liturgical consultants and many designers.

The walls of the sanctuary can surround the altar and enframe it, often articulated with panels, pilasters, or columns to give scale. These elements become the backdrop for the altar, like a landscape within a Renaissance portrait, which always adds to the meaning of the portrayed. The placement and composition of the walls should allow for iconographical elements as well as areas for chair, tabernacle, and other elements.

The apse, whether semi-circular, octagonal or square creates an ending for the building and receives the gaze of the worshippers. Elaborating on the idea of the baldacchino, the sanctuary is itself an aedicule or tempietto, which reaffirms the primacy of the altar by implying a partially centralized shape. The design of the apse, or rear wall, is especially crucial as a focus of the sanctuary, and frequently displays Christological or Trinitarian imagery, often surrounded by saints or the heavenly hosts. Being the backdrop for the altar, the apse is an important focus of the church, and is therefore also an appropriate place to represent the sacrifice of the Mass through a cross or a crucifix. It is also an appropriate place for an altarpiece, which might include an image of the titular saint of the church. The use of gold and other colors to give emphasis to the sanctuary aids in reminding us of the heavenly banquet, which the sanctuary prefigures.

Historically, all cultures have honored important objects and rites within tall vertical spaces. One thinks of congress halls, throne rooms, library reading rooms, banquet halls, and temples. Just as the priest prays “that these gifts be borne by the hands of your holy Angel to your altar on high . . .” So the sanctuary should imply this vertical access to heaven, of which we partake in the Mass. The ceiling above the sanctuary can be especially helpful in focusing on the altar, by using a dome or vault to represent the heavens. A flat or coffered ceiling may also be employed, drawing on the geometry of the walls and floor, and possibly having a central element above the altar.

THE ALTAR AND TABERNACLE ARE INTERRELATED

The tabernacle is rightly seen as an extension of the sacrifice of the Mass, a house for the reservation of Christ’s Body offered on the altar. The conciliar documents see the tabernacle as crucial to the definition of the church: a



The Church of San Carlo al Corso in Rome, Italy, principally designed by architects Onorio Longhi and Martino Longhi the Younger (1668), demonstrates how a semicircular apse creates a focal point for the sanctuary.

Facing page: The altar and tabernacle should be readily identifiable upon entering a church. The new sanctuary of the Cathedral of St. Joseph in Sioux Falls, South Dakota by Duncan G. Stroik (2011).

“house of prayer in which the Most Holy Eucharist is celebrated and reserved.”¹³ As symbol and presence of the Lord, it seems natural that the altar and the tabernacle should be readily identifiable upon entering the church building. Pius XII wrote, “It is one and the same Lord who is immolated on the altar and honored in the tabernacle, and who pours out his blessings from the tabernacle.”¹⁴ The tabernacle should be designed and constructed in a manner commensurate with its high status

13. Second Vatican Council, Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, On the Ministry and Life of Priests (1965), 5. “The house of prayer in which the Most Holy Eucharist is celebrated and reserved, where the faithful gather, and where the presence of the Son of God, our Savior, offered for us on the altar of sacrifice bestows strength and blessings on the faithful, must be spotless and suitable for prayer and sacred functions.” See also SC 122-127.

14. Pope Pius XII, “The Liturgical Movement” (address, International Congress on Pastoral Liturgy, Assisi, Italy (September 22, 1956).



GLORIA IN EXCELSIS DEO ET IN TERRA PAX HOMINIBVS BONAE VOLVNTATIS



and inherent dignity, and located in a position that engenders the respect of the faithful.¹⁵

The altar, which represents Christ who is the perfect altar of sacrifice, and the tabernacle, which houses Christ's Real Presence, are rightly placed in the sanctuary and seen as interrelated. Spiritually, the design of the church building begins with the altar, then moves to the tabernacle, and then flows from them. This can be thought of as analogous to the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. The tabernacle and the altar are both appropriate foci of the church building, and thus their location is most appropriately on the central axis of the church, allowing their interdependence to be made evident.

According to canon law, the house for the reservation of the Blessed Sacrament "is to be situated in some part of the church or oratory which is distinguished, conspicuous, beautifully decorated, and suitable for prayer."¹⁶ Again, the natural location for the most important elements in a building will be on the central axis. This is why in the synagogue, the bema faces the ark which holds the Scriptures. Many Protestant churches place the pulpit at the center to express their faith in *Sola Scriptura*, while some denominations will place a baptismal pool in the apse. Should not those who esteem the Eucharist treat the placement of the tabernacle in like manner? If placed on the central axis, the tabernacle will be in the most prominent location visible to the assembly during the liturgy and outside of it. The tabernacle will be given similar prominence as the altar, because it is the location of the abiding presence of Christ, who said, "I am with you always, until the end of the age" (Mt 28:20).

There are many solutions to reserving the Blessed Sacrament in a prominent way: in a hanging pyx, wall safe, ark of the covenant, sacrament tower, or as a miniature church or tempietto. The tabernacle can be placed on the central axis at the back of the apse or in a chapel, on a shrine or pedestal, on an old high altar, and should be raised to a height so that it is generally visible in the church.¹⁷ As part

15. Libreria Editrice Vaticana, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Second Edition (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), 1183. Hereafter CCC. "The tabernacle is to be situated 'in churches in a most worthy place with the greatest honor.' The dignity, placing, and security of the Eucharistic tabernacle should foster adoration before the Lord really present in the Blessed Sacrament of the altar." See also Pope Paul VI, Encyclical *Mysterium Fidei*, On the Holy Eucharist (1965), and SC 128.

16. Code of Canon Law, 938 §2. Hereafter CIC. Some have emphasized the place suitable for prayer to mean private or more intimate prayer, thus resulting in separate chapels of the Blessed Sacrament.

17. See GIRM 315.



The Blessed Sacrament Chapel of the Basilica of St. Peter in Rome, Italy with a tabernacle by Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1674) and a painting of the Trinity by Pietro da Cortona (1631).

of a high altar, the design and placement of the tabernacle shall be prominent, and should offer a connection with the altar of sacrifice and the altar in heaven. Canon law requires that "a special lamp which indicates and honors the presence of Christ is to shine continuously" before the tabernacle, signifying Christ's presence.¹⁸

In America, tabernacles have traditionally been constructed out of some type of bronze, especially the doors. However, in many Renaissance churches, the tabernacle is a small marble doorway placed on the wall, while in many Baroque churches there is a tradition of integrating it as one part of the marble altar. One can find examples in Europe of beautiful tabernacles made out of natural or painted wood, gold and silver, sometimes with inlaid precious jewels. In general, a tabernacle should be in keeping with the design of the altar, but this does not prevent it from being more ornate than other elements in the church. As one of the smallest liturgical elements in the church, it can be argued that the tabernacle deserves particular emphasis, articulation, and fine materials. The architecture and art surrounding the tabernacle should help make it a focus of the church's horizontal axis.

Both the laity and the liturgical establishment agree that a crucial issue today in the design of Catholic churches in America is this: What should the relation between the altar and the tabernacle be? We have begun

18. See CIC 940, which implies wax or oil.



Interior of the Cathedral of Notre Dame d'Amiens, France (1200–1270). Despite its verticality, the nave of the church is oriented toward the sanctuary and the altar at its center.

our design of the church with its focus, the altar, and is not the tabernacle rightly seen as the extension of the altar?¹⁹ The house of the Blessed Sacrament only exists because of the altar of sacrifice. Of the seven sacraments received in the church, the Sacrament of Communion is most closely associated with the two elements of altar and tabernacle. Therefore, it would follow that the tabernacle keeps a certain reference to the altar, so that its design and location can express its theological and sacramental link with the Eucharistic celebration.

A separate place of reservation of the Blessed Sacrament is allowed as traditional in cathedrals, shrines, and many ancient churches in Rome. Those favoring such a solution as a model for parish churches emphasize the need for a place to foster devotion to the Blessed Sacrament.²⁰ It is necessary, however, to remind ourselves

19. *On Holy Communion and the Worship of the Eucharistic Mystery Outside of Mass* 80, “When the faithful worship Christ in the blessed Sacrament they should recollect that this presence is derived from the sacrifice and evokes sacramental and spiritual communion.”

20. GIRM, 315. (1975, 276).

how beautiful and spacious the Eucharistic chapels in Rome are: Some of them are more transcendent and have greater amounts of iconography than the finest cathedrals in America. Furthermore, when considering a separate chapel, one must remember that, for many of the faithful, having a Blessed Sacrament chapel may make the nave feel like it is not a place of prayer.²¹

THE NAVE EMPHASIZES THE PRIMACY OF THE SANCTUARY

It is not sufficient, though, to have a beautiful altar and prominent tabernacle within a worthy sanctuary. The rest of the church must follow. The nave is the body of the church, in which the faithful gather, symbolizing our spiritual journey toward the beatific vision. Thus, the nave is oriented toward the sanctuary and its center, the altar. The seating and placement of aisles can be arranged so as to focus on the sanctuary, which symbolizes our heavenly goal. The provision of a central aisle affords experience of the main axis, and allows processions to signify the journey of faith toward the heavenly sanctuary.²² Because this journey is made possible by the sacraments, places for Baptism, Penance, and private devotion will be provided within or adjacent to the nave.

In general, the nave will have a vertical proportion reflecting the transcendent proportions and shape of the sanctuary. It should create a beautiful whole—like a body with a properly proportioned head and torso. A threshold can further emphasize the primacy of the sanctuary. This is often accomplished by a triumphal arch, a crossing with a dome, a transept, or some other architectural device. The threshold can be employed with more or less unity between the nave and sanctuary. For instance, some early Christian basilicas had a colonnade to which was attached fabric not unlike the Byzantine iconostasis. In Medieval churches a strong separation was accomplished by the use of a screen or even a wall (the *ponte* or *tremezzo*), whereas Renaissance and Baroque architects sought for a visual unity while maintaining a more subtle physical distinction. At Santa Maria Novella in Florence, Giorgio Vasari

21. This was made quite clear in the American bishops’ discussion of a new draft document on architecture, *Domus Dei*, November 1999. Of the 32 bishops who spoke up, the sentiment was almost unanimous, that the location of the tabernacle should be in the sanctuary for all the faithful to see.

22. It also signifies the royal wedding of the Church. “With joy and gladness they are led along as they enter the palace of the king.” Ps 45:15.

was asked by Duke Cosimo to remove the *ponte* in the middle of the nave to allow the laity to see the high altar and to encourage a greater spatial unity.²³

In this regard we may also learn something from secular examples: Just as the Louvre does not exhibit the Mona Lisa in the lobby, nor the Vatican Museums place the main entrance directly in front of the Sistine Chapel, so church sanctuaries will be placed at the end of the nave. The journey toward the holy place is just as important as the arrival. Entrance into the nave should draw us toward the Blessed Sacrament made present on the altar and reserved in the tabernacle. It should defer in architectural design to the sanctuary either by a similar design or by a harmonious contrast. The nave's composition, marked by windows, or pilasters or colonnades, will be related to the scale and proportion of the sanctuary and altar itself. Normally the materials and coloration would be slightly simpler or less refined than the altar area. The nave can be likened to the plot of a novel, in which themes are developed that help prepare the reader for the story's conclusion in the sanctuary.



The Pantheon, now the Church of Santa Maria ad Martyres, in Rome, Italy (converted in 609). A centralized church with a focus on the sanctuary and altar.

In all shapes of churches, whether basilical, cruciform, or hall types, there are architectural motifs which focus on the sanctuary, as well as on the altar. Traditionally, the focus on the East was integral to the liturgy and its architecture, reiterating the eschatological hope of the Church. Centralized types can also emphasize the sacredness of the ritual, the real action of the Mass, and the Real Presence of the Eucharist. Within the multiplicity of centralized church types: circular, oval, octagonal, or cruciform, there is still the definition of a separate sanctuary rather than a

23. Marcia B. Hall, *Renovation and Counter-Reformation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

mere freestanding altar. We see this at some of Christendom's greatest works of art: San Vitale in Ravenna, the Palatine Chapel at Aachen, Santa Maria della Consolazione at Todi, and Santa Maria ad Martyres in Rome.

I would now like to briefly examine the theater type, which is so popular today with architects and liturgists. The difficulty with the semicircle or fan shapes is that they are forms derived from theater and entertainment buildings. In fact, many meeting rooms and legislative halls are based on theater types, which works quite well for a conference, but it makes for a very mediocre church. Until the advent of Modernist architecture, these forms were never part of the Catholic tradition. Up until recently, the reasons normally given for their use were merely functional. Having only one focus, the theater type is less flexible than the longitudinal or centralized type, and naturally puts the priest and the lectors in the place of an entertainer. Within the theater type, it is most difficult to create a sanctuary in which there is a sense of eastward movement, verticality, and transcendence.

THE INTEGRATION OF DEVOTIONAL AND LITURGICAL ELEMENTS

The church building is designed for the liturgy, which is the summit and the font of our life.²⁴ But it should also accommodate and support private or group devotion, which springs from the liturgy and leads back to it.²⁵ These two elements of liturgy and devotion, which are related insofar as they feed one another spiritually,²⁶ should both be considered in the design of the church. What better place to pray the words of the Angel Gabriel's Annunciation, or to request the intercession of the holy men and women of old, than in the nave of a church, in the presence of the altar and the site of the liturgy? To support devotion, chapels or devotional shrines should be integrated with, and distinguished from, the nave by being given their own place such as in niches, side walls,

24. See SC 10.

25. See SC 13, "Popular devotions of the Christian people are to be highly commended, provided they accord with the laws and norms of the Church, above all when they are ordered by the Apostolic See. Devotions proper to individual churches also have a special dignity if they are undertaken by mandate of the bishops according to customs or books lawfully approved."

26. See SC 13, "But these devotions should be so drawn up that they harmonize with the liturgical seasons, accord with the sacred liturgy, are in some fashion derived from it, and lead the people to it, since, in fact, the liturgy by its very nature far surpasses any of them."

or separate chapels. However, it is not really in harmony with the altar and sanctuary to relegate images of the saints to the least noticeable areas of the church (such as the rear) or to place them only in the Blessed Sacrament chapel, as is often done with modern churches and renovations of historic ones.



Preaching from the ambo, Bishop William Lori dedicates the Church of Saint Mary's in Norwalk, Connecticut. Renovation by Duncan G. Stroik (2011).

Devotional images, including shrines to the Mother of God or to the saints, and Stations of the Cross, surround us with material images of the invisible reality—the communion of saints and the truths of the faith. Just as Mary always points us toward her Son—“Do whatever he tells you” (Jn 2:6)—so these images of devotion point us toward their liturgical consummation: Christ’s Eucharistic sacrifice exemplified in the altar and tabernacle. In some cases these shrines or side chapels will become miniature churches, daughters of the main sanctuary, and in that way

they help prepare us for, and remind us of, the centrality of the liturgy in the lives of the saints and in our lives.

The elements of the church—such as ambo, baptismal font, confessionals, and the place for musicians—need to be considered in light of these other aspects. The nave and sanctuary are the setting for the elements of sacrament and liturgy: the central sign of the altar, the tabernacle of the Real Presence, the sacred chrism for anointing, the chair of the priest, the ambo for proclaiming the Word of God, the baptistry, and a place for Penance.²⁷ After the placement of the altar and tabernacle, the placement of the other liturgical-sacramental elements follows, though perhaps with a less determined hierarchy. Yet the design and placement of these elements needs to enhance the design of the church and point to the centrality of the Eucharist. Balance and harmony are sought, realizing, for instance, that the location of the baptismal font may have an effect on the location of the confessional. The liturgical-sacramental elements are central to the action of the liturgies, and are the visible objects from which the faithful receive the sacraments. They are therefore sacramental elements and places of special holiness, which should be treated with awe and respect by the faithful.²⁸ They should, like the altar and tabernacle, be designed using the finest materials possible, and in most instances they should be given a specifically defined area within the body of the church. The liturgical-sacramental elements should be designed in such a way that people understand that they are holy objects, and not to be taken lightly. As these elements are expressive of liturgy, it is possible for the design of the font and the baptistry to help express the baptismal liturgy, the confessional to enhance the seriousness of individual repentance and absolution, and the ambo to highlight the significance of the Liturgy of the Word by being placed within a defined area and raised up. The “treasury of art” that is the Church’s inheritance²⁹ offers models and inspiration for the design of these elements to “worthily and beautifully serve the dignity of worship.”³⁰ For the sake of both traditional and progressive Catholics, it is essential that we reappropriate the depth of meaning found in the elements of a church by attentiveness to their placement and design.

27. See CCC 1182–1185.

28. See Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Vicesimus Quintus Annus*, On the 25th Anniversary of the Promulgation of the Conciliar Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* On the Sacred Liturgy (1988), 7.

29. SC 123, “treasury of art which must be carefully preserved.”

30. SC 122.



The Jesuit Iglesia de la Compañía de Jesús in Arequipa, Peru by Simon of Barrientos (1654), with its façade evocative of a *retablo*.

THE EXTERIOR EXTENDS THE SANCTITY OF THE ALTAR

The façade is the first image of the church that the worshipper sees, and is therefore crucial for setting up the sense of the sacred within. The image of sacrifice and resurrection can be made evident in symbols such as the cross, images of the saints, or even conscious use of similar architectural motifs from inside the church. This is often done in both the Gothic and Spanish traditions, in which the façade becomes a giant reredos symbolizing the sanctuary brought out to the street. This is congruent with that pious custom of crossing oneself when passing in front of a church in which Christ is present.

The façade also sets up or ends the central axis, which is the direct path from the altar and the tabernacle to the outside (profane) world. The designs of some churches establish such a close connection between the altar and the façade that, when all the doors are opened and Mass is being celebrated inside, there is a wonderful collapse of distance, and the altar appears to come forward. At Santa Brigida in Rome the façade has a pair of columns holding up a broken pediment, giving us a literal intimation of the reredos over the altar. The façade and central portal should frame the altar and sanctuary, becoming the first threshold we pass over. The prothyron

at a church such as San Clemente presents itself as a sister of the baldacchino over the altar (we enter the church through one; Christ enters the church through the other). Many Romanesque period loggias—proto-narthexes added to ancient basilicas—are designed like an interior aisle placed perpendicularly to the nave entrance and are something to pass through, as at San Lorenzo fuori le Mura or Santa Maria in Trastevere. The portals at San Marco in Venice, as well as at Notre Dame in Paris, intimate the vaulted space of the nave or the sanctuary within. At Sant'Ivo and San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane by Borromini or at Sant'Andrea al Quirinale by Bernini we are presented with curvilinear façades that are precursors of the undulating interiors and apses.

The exterior claims the precinct of the church as holy ground; it extends the sanctity of the altar into the world, and, as it were, brings the interior out, though not in a literal way (such as with a glass wall, which actually negates the sense of mystery). At the same time, the exterior creates



The façade and central portal represent the first threshold we walk over when entering a church, as with the ancient prothyron of the Basilica of San Clemente in Rome, Italy.

a threshold, so that in crossing it people understand that they are entering a realm set apart for communion with God and his people. The exterior must bring a sense of the sacred into the secular realm while maintaining a



The main façade and piazza of the Cathedral of St. Rupert in Salzburg, Austria by Santino Solari (1614–1628) extends the sanctity of the church into the world, while also setting it apart from the secular realm.

threshold.³¹ The exterior of the church will be the first hint of the nave, the holiness of the sanctuary and sacredness of the altar. For some, seeing the exterior of a church will be their only knowledge of Catholicism or of Christ. May it be beautiful, welcoming, solemn, and transcendent.

One of the best ways to do this is to provide the church with an outdoor atrium or piazza, which allows people to experience the exterior of the building and provides an appropriate anteroom. The atrium or piazza becomes the first room of the procession to the altar.

31. CCC, 1186, “Finally, the church has an eschatological significance. To enter into the house of God, we must cross a *threshold*, which symbolizes passing from the world wounded by sin to the world of the new Life to which all men are called.”

The siting of a church as the house of God, whether in the countryside or in the city, will follow the same principles we have already elaborated. As the embodiment of the altar, it will be placed in a prominent location that gives the building and the Mass true dignity.

In summary, the understanding of the meaning of the altar will cause us to make it the most beautiful object possible. The design of other sacramental and devotional elements, and of the Church building itself, should follow. The centrality of the Eucharist as commemoration, sacrifice, and communion requires our churches to be elaborate in meaning as well as in architecture. If we design our churches to center on, and grow out from, Christ present in the most holy altar and tabernacle, this will help us to regain the beautiful and the sacred in the liturgy and, ultimately, in our lives.