

HOW CHURCHES ARE

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The archdeacon silently contemplated the gigantic building for a while, then sighed as he stretched out his right hand towards the printed book lying open on his table and his left hand towards Notre-Dame, and looked sadly from the book to the church.

'Alas! He said, this will kill that.'

Victor Hugo, *Notre-Dame de Paris*
Translation by Alban Kraitsheimer
Oxford University Press 1993

In the book *Notre-Dame de Paris*, Victor Hugo discusses how buildings themselves were books. All that the faithful needed to know was carved in the stones and shaped in the glass. Those Gothic books still inspire and speak to use today. Hugo's archdeacon predicted, "The book will kill the building." With the printing press the individual author can more easily express in books what artistic collectives expressed in architecture.

Today, we live in a literate society and our church buildings do not need to instruct us in the same way the old churches did. Other factors have worked to dramatically change the form of our churches. Among these is the cost of labor and improved technology. But most important were the changes instituted by Vatican II.

The purpose of this article is to review how liturgical changes can manifest themselves in two different architecture projects. (Both designed by the author.) One is a renovation of an existing church. The other is a new church.

EVOLUTION OF THE LITURGY

The Liturgy that we know today evolved over time. The earliest gatherings were small clandestine groups around the table of a house. As the *Word* spread, the Christians in Rome built underground gathering and burial areas known as the catacombs. Once Christianity was legalized, the Church came above ground and the House of the Church (*domus ecclesia*) came with them.



A Greek Temple

Roman and Greek temples were designed as a good place for individuals to bring animal sacrifice and scry fowl before their favorite graven image. The early Christians wanted to gather together and pray. This was the most radical transformation of holy space in history – the assembly as a sacred act. They discarded the temple form and borrowed the Roman basilica, which was used for offices or shopping malls. Christians also embraced the Roman arts of sculpture, painting and mosaic.



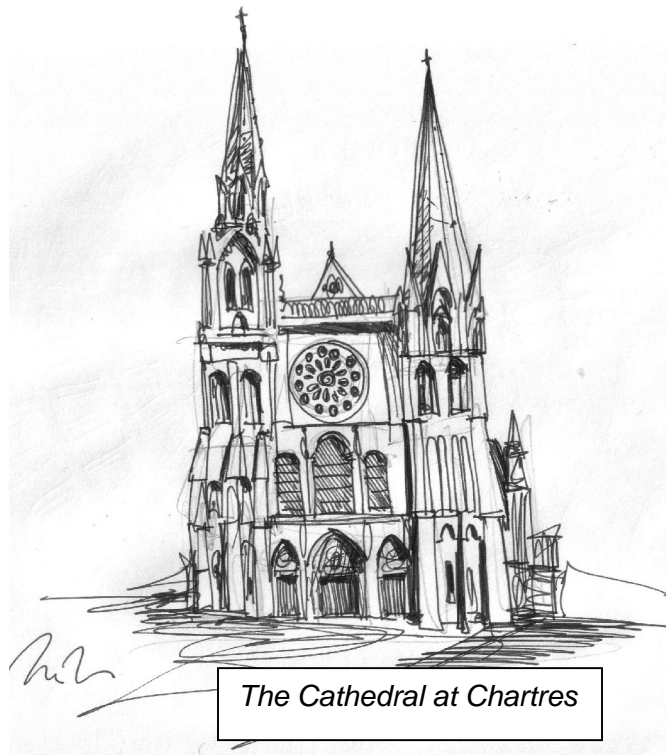
Over time, traditions and rituals evolved into the Latin Mass many of us remember from the middle of the 20th century. The unbaptized were not permitted in our consecrated churches, so fonts were outside the main nave and baptisms were private ceremonies. The ceremonial immersion in the early church was reduced to small anointings. The holy language of Latin inspired awe but isolated the faithful from communal prayer. The separation of the priest from the congregation with the rail enhanced the awe. The distribution of communion over the rail and directly on the tongue was to prevent secreting away the host and desecrating of the Body of Christ. The remote choir loft was to create the illusion of the voices of angels but discouraged the Parish from participation. The dominant central presence of the Tabernacle deemed that due respect be shown by having all face the Holy Eucharist. This discouraged interaction between the people and the Priest who recited prayers alone. The presence of the Blessed Sacrament in the Tabernacle competed with the profundity of the Consecration. The altar, the table of the last supper, had become an elaborately decorated narrow shelf attached to the wall.

LITURGIES ARE RENEWED

With the Bishops during Vatican II, Pope John XXIII saw the opportunity to bring the community back into the Mass. It was a historical shift. The altar rails were removed. Baptism was brought into the community and the option of immersion revived. We were encouraged to sing with the choir and pray with the Priest in our own language. Permissible music was expanded; liturgical dance was revived. We began to receive the Body of Christ in our hands while standing. The altar was moved forward so the Priest could face us. Going to Mass was to become more like participating around the family dinner table than observing a show at a local theater. The Bishops did not see these as changes but as a *renewal* of the earlier context of the ritual and prayer forms.

DOES THE ARCHITECTURE NEED TO CHANGE?

Most of our churches were designed before Vatican II and justifiably hold esteemed places in our hearts. But today, participation and simpler and stronger rituals are encouraged and the architecture should reflect this. The physical changes to the building are far less dramatic (although more visible) than the Liturgical changes instituted by pope John XXIII. An approach to design is outlined by the American Bishops in **Build of Living Stone** and **Environment and Art in Catholic Worship**. All the directives there are based on the Liturgy described in the **General Instruction of the Roman Missal**.



The two case studies, we can illustrate the approach in actual practice.

TWO OPPORTUNITIES



Holv Name of Marv. Croton-on-Hudson.

The Parish of **Holy Name of Mary** is a revivalist Romanesque church built in the early 20th century in Croton-on-Hudson, New York. It had been designed to accommodate traditions that were over 1,000 years old. Here the challenge was to allow the interior architecture style to continue to dominate but adapt the floor plan to respond to the liturgical changes within existing walls. The added challenge was to rejuvenate the church without destroying the elements that endeared it to the parish. We appeared at numerous public sessions to explain the design changes and listen and convince them that we were not representatives of Satan sent to destroy their church.

The Parish of **Saint Joseph** in Spring Valley, New York, was building a new church to replace their small chapel and the school gymnasium that served them for over thirty years. Here we had the opportunity to rethink the floor plan for a post-Vatican II design. While the Parish would have appreciated any church that did not have a basketball net at each end, we saw the opportunity to create a traditionally inspiring aesthetic space within the *limitations* of modern technology.



St. Joseph's Church.

GATHERING:

An entrance space is important for socialization to build a Parish community. Older Roman churches, like Saint Paul's outside the Walls in Rome, had an entire atrium (court) area as large as the church. At Saint Joseph's we built a portico on the front of the church and a larger vestibule than has been customary. Together they make a series of transitions from the parking lot to the nave. At Holy Name of Mary like older churches, the existing vestibule was too small. Here we removed a set of doors to open the small vestibule to the rear of the nave. We set the old altar rail about fifteen feet from the rear wall to create a gathering space underneath the choir loft.

THE BAPTISMAL FONT:

When possible fonts should be permanent and have living (moving) water. Placement should allow for Initiation into the community, often a mass. The Bishops also instruct that fonts must allow for the option of immersion. Baptism is based on the Greek Word 'to dip'. Recently, most fonts were moved near the altar to take them out of the backroom chapels. The result was often a crowded altar area. By locating the font near the entrance of the church, another "holy" space is created and parishioners can bless themselves from the front as they enter the church. This was easily done in both churches. The fonts allow for immersion and have running water. In Holy Name of Mary, the rear pews were adjusted to allow for ample aisle space on both sides.

THE BEMA AND THE ASSEMBLY:

The Bishops suggest that during the Liturgy emphasis should be on the altar, the ambo (pulpit), and the President's (Priest) chair. Each piece represents the unique ways we relate to God. They should be visible and a platform (bema) is often the solution. (*Bema* is a term I am borrowing from the Jewish tradition and is not part of Catholic Bishops' instruction.) They should not be too elevated so that they seem remote. *Environment and Art* states "The most powerful experience of the sacred is found in the celebration, that is, it is found in the action of the assembly." To eliminate the separation between these pieces and the people, in Saint Joseph's the seats are on three sides of the bema under the same ceiling. The bema holds only the three pieces. Behind them is a wall with the cross and art glass window above. Four stone piers visually set the limits of the bema. At Holy Name of Mary, we moved the bema forward in front of the arch separating the nave from the sanctuary to the intersection of the nave and transept. This put the Priest and altar in the same space as the assembly. This also allowed us to set seats on each side in the transepts. The old confessional fronts became our rood screen behind the altar to give the altar a suitable dignified background and separate the day chapel from the rest of the Assembly.

THE CHOIR:

Since the Vatican II, choirs have become leaders of song rather than distant singers. Removing the choir from the loft (even though it is often an acoustically superior space), to among the Parish, has become common. In the Holy Name of Mary, the choir was moved (and slightly stuffed) into one of the transepts to bring them to the main floor. At Saint Joseph's, we had the luxury of providing new space to one side of the bema.

ROOM OF RECONCILIATION:

Built of Living Stone hesitates to use the word "confessional". Instead Parishes are asked to provide a "place" for the celebration of the reconciliation liturgy. Many Liturgists feel that place should be designated a "chapel" as it properly elevates a sacrament too often ignored. The place should allow for face to face or anonymous encounters. At the



Holy Name of Mary, the confessionals were removed to make room in the transept for more pews. The new Room of Reconciliation was placed in one side of the old sacristy. The room is off the new small chapel created behind the rood screen. At Saint Joseph's we provided a naturally lit room off the nave closer to the font at the entrance, which is preferred by the Bishops.

EUCCHARISTIC CHAPEL:

The miracle of Transubstantiation would have more emphasis if the presence of our Lord were not already embodied in the Eucharist in the Tabernacle. **Built of Living Stone** instructs, "a church building also offers a place to which individuals may come to pray in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament." For this reason a chapel is to be dedicated to the Blessed Sacrament to provide for a continuous presence and private devotion. But this presence should not conflict with the action of the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

In both cases the placement of the Tabernacle inspired the most debate. Many felt removing the tabernacle indicated the "liturgists" do not respect the true presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. I can speak as a believer that by moving the Tabernacle to an honored yet off centered location is not done because we don't believe respect the Eucharist, but because we honor the Blessed Sacrament so much!

The solution for creating a Eucharistic Chapel in both churches provided similar results. In Saint Joseph's we created a unique niche (which is visible from the outside of the church) that holds the Tabernacle. It has art glass behind it acting as a sort of a monstrance. At the Holy Name of Mary, we converted a side niche into the chapel added accent lighting, added an inner niche, and reused some of the altar rail as kneelers.

AESTHETICS:

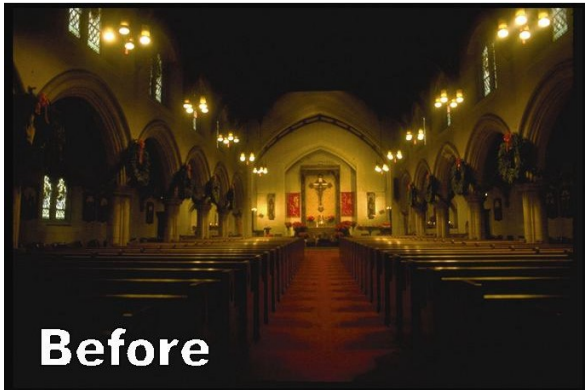
There are many architectural styles of churches that have been built over time. Yet, (with the exception of some recent ones) most look like a *church*. This is perhaps because there are certain arche-types or forms that we can all visually read. Two characteristics we associate with "church" are loftiness and light. Gothic churches, such as Chartres Cathedral (built in France), had great vaults supported by flying buttresses. They used stained glass to change the color of inside the church. Renaissance churches, such as St. Peters in Rome, have the soaring dome, with lantern tops so light enters mysteriously from the ceilings. Many modern churches convey the same feeling. Notre-Dame Du Ronchamp by Le Corbusier is very modern, employs no traditional form, and yet it reads "church".

In every era, every style of architecture has great examples and poor examples. Today's architecture sermon: Old does not necessary mean good and modern does not necessarily mean bad.

Holy Name of Mary was designed as part of a building tradition that spanned one thousand years. It employed local masons building the Croton Dam to set its stone. The church already had lofty trusses on tall walls and many stained glass windows. We saw that essentially the church needed repairs on the inside. The detailed plasterwork needed to be re-done. The flooring was damaged. The stained glass was removed and restored. We did make two subtle changes that made a dramatic difference in light and color.



The original chandeliers had large watt lamps installed to improve reading (a post Vatican II change since reading missalettes is now more important) but they increased glare. The ornate truss work above could not be seen. We kept the chandeliers and put low watt lamps to keep them warm. We added new high intensity quartz down lights hidden behind the trusses. They illuminate the whole church (making it appear loft again), with a better color balance and no glare.



For color, we decide to contrast the warm brown woods with cold gray stones and plaster. All wood was restored to a rich (but not dark) oak finish. All other surfaces were painted a cool gray with certain arch stones highlighted in a darker color. We also created some arch stones for the ambry and the Eucharistic Chapels.

We designed the new altar, ambo, chair, and font to employ motifs existing in the building (the corbelled arches and the carved scroll work.) This tied the significant liturgical pieces to the church. Each piece featured a warm red granite slab. For example the altar slab is a square 4-foot by 4 foot and 6 inches thick. It weights 1500 pounds and sits on a table-like wood base which is open like the arches of the nave and has the same carved detail that appears on the rood screen – formerly the confessional fronts.

At **Saint Joseph's** we had to create the feeling of a church. From the outside the intersecting sloped roofs and the “stone” and stucco exterior are very traditional. The portico opens up the solid walls through which you can see the interior of the church.



The stone piers are reminiscent of the old chapel still on site and designate the beginning of a holy space. The ornate wood doors indicate the passage into a different kind of space. Like Saint Paul's Outside the Walls or the ancient Temples at Jerusalem, we created a series of more holy spaces to prepare you for entrance to the single space nave.

On the interior the use of exposed structure – the wood and metal of the trusses – express the power of our roof as it rises above our heads. The central trusses stand on stone piers expressing the strength of the foundation. The stone of the altar, ambo and font are cut from granite boulders, the rock of the earth on which the building stands. Our church (both the building and the collective people) is strong and anchored.

Many new churches try to encourage brightness by painting the walls light colors but the result is often large sterile walls with occasional decorations hanging on them. In selecting colors, finishes and furnishings, we wanted Saint Joseph's to have a visual richness. The uses of natural materials such as the expressive cherrywood red of the ceiling dominate the color scheme. With such strong elements we decided the walls needed to be painted a similar darker color so they would be able to visually support the ceiling.

Since the building is very engineered and all pieces are "machined" we wanted the art pieces to show a more human touch. The art glass by Jean Jacques Duval with Rohlf's Stained & Leaded Glass was conceived as backdrops to the cross and Tabernacle respectively. The altar, ambo, and font are carved from New Hampshire granite boulders by sculptor Paul Molinelli - (yes, a cousin of the author). The natural surfaces show God's handiwork while some surfaces have been honed or smoothed to represent man's work. The front doors designed by the author combine images of the trusses and Saint Joseph's tools on the outside and the cross on the inside.

READ OUR CHURCHES

Most of what we know of ancient cultures comes from the ruins of their architecture. Written accounts on parchment or papyrus dissolve over time. The shapes of rooms, the carvings on the walls, and even the change of materials read like history texts to them. If Victor Hugo or some future archaeologists were to come to the New York Archdiocese today they might want to read the books that are about our churches today. Collectively what would our books tell them? Would they tell them that the stone and plaster era was gone and the metal stud and sheetrock era dominated? Would they tell them that churches were getting bigger because the Priests were becoming fewer? Would they notice that non-liturgical space was increasing – emphasizing education?

If the architects have done their job correctly, our churches should tell them of our dedication to God, our belief in Jesus as our Savior, and the living faith that is the Holy Spirit in each of us. Today's buildings are not the stone Bibles or carved text books that were built in the Gothic times. The church, the domus ecclesia, today represents a different priority. Most Parishes would not want to spend two hundred years to build a church. Does that mean our faith is not as strong? Maybe, the comparative simplicity of modern churches reflecting modern Liturgies would say something else. Maybe our church book would read: Their faith, their Church, was carried in their hearts and their souls and expressed in their kindness to and love of others.

