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STAGE THREE RENEWAL

You could argue — I myself would be willing to argue — that the reform of Church architecture was never really addressed during the lifetimes of the Reformers. Luther, Zwingli, Calvin: They had other items on their agenda. They had their hands full with teaching the gospel to uncomprehending peasant multitudes, and with defending their positions before an uncomprehending Church hierarchy. So the reform or remodeling of existing church buildings was not high on their list of things to do.

To his credit, Luther himself favoured a free-standing altar, with pastor presiding at Eucharist *versus populum* (facing the people). But that's about the extent of Luther's architectural innovations. Luther's liturgical texts, his Latin mass and German mass, were ground-breaking. But most church architecture remained steadfastly unmodified. From Reformation times until our own.

So, you could argue — I myself would be willing to argue — that it was not until the theological and liturgical ferment of the Twentieth Century, and the Second Vatican Council, that proper attention was turned to the spaces we use for worship. And most of our worship spaces were found wanting.

In an earlier Essay ([Essay 81](#)) I described a congregation's modification of its existing worship space that attempted to move, over the years, in the direction of honouring the principles of the Second Vatican Council. "Vatican 2" deplored the signals of "we-they" so often implicit in "two-room" worship spaces. Here's the nave: a space for Us, the worshipers. And there's the chancel: a space apart, and often elevated, for Them, the ordained. That's an unhappy signal to be sending, in these days when we're trying to re-claim an understanding of the Priesthood of All Believers.

Let's consider, then, the disposition of space in our sanctuaries. And let's identify three stages of worship renewal.

Stage One represents the kind of church interior most of us recall when we think “church”. We were brought up, most of us, to think of a church building as precisely the two-room space I’ve just described above. Sure, in the interests of liturgical renewal we’ll allow a measure of modification and recasting in the *texts* of our worship. But the space we’re in looks pretty much the way it looked to Luther or even to Augustine: Ordained clergy are up there with God in the elevated chancel in the building’s East end — maybe even further set apart by a rood screen or *iconostasis*. And laity? We’re down here in the nave, several steps below the chancel, with rows of pews or seats stretching back to the entrance door in the West. Worshipers all face the chancel in the East. You see ahead of you a sea of hair: the back of everyone’s head.

The chancel, in Stage One buildings, is elevated at least three steps above nave level, and contains all the holy furniture: seats for the ordained clergy, altar, lectern, perhaps even pulpit and font and choir. The altar is bolted to the East wall, perhaps further fenced off with an altar rail. The pulpit is perhaps matched like a Rorschach with the lectern, or with the font, at the very lip of the chancel steps, one at North and one at South. There’s perhaps a divided choir in the chancel, with ranks of choir stalls along the North chancel wall and the South chancel wall. And weekdays you could easily find a red velvet rope at nave level at the foot of the chancel steps, closing off any errant entrance to the chancel. Its unmistakable signal: “Un-ordained Keep Out!”

Now, that’s what a church looks like, right? Wrong. That’s indeed what a church looked like for perhaps seventeen hundred years, during the Constantinian Captivity of the Church. (But see my critique of the Constantinian Era at [Essay 73](#).) What’s wrong with a Constantinian Era church building? Here’s what’s wrong.

First, such a worship space is highly Hierarchical. That separate, elevated chancel sends the signal that worship leaders — the ordained — are closer to God than the rest of us down here in the nave. “Hierarchy” is from two Greek words; Together they mean “Priests first”.

It’s not surprising that nave-and-chancel churches have often been defended as embodying a kind of Sacred Journey, “the Church on the move.” Here’s the Christian community on its pilgrimage to the new Jerusalem, or even the Church Militant, marching “like a mighty army”, rank on rank (the people in the pews), with officers and lieutenants in the vanguard (the choir and other worship leaders), with our Commanding Officer (the priest) in the very front, fearlessly leading his troops — it was always a “he” — like Alexander the Great. See [Essay 63](#). I’ve heard such a disposition of space described as an arrow, with the priest at the altar the arrowhead. Beyond and ahead in the East lies — what? The Rising Son? The New Jerusalem? The glories of God?

Yes, such a space arrangement does suggest Transcendence: God is out there, in the East, beyond us, ahead of us, apart from us, Holy Other than us. Particularly when the worship leader or priest is orienting, that is, facing East, facing the altar wall (*contra murem*), his back to his people. (I said it was always a “he”.) And it’s an impressive

experience, for all to be facing East, “facing the Lord”: foot soldiers, officers and lieutenants, Commander: All facing East.

But however you interpret such a space, detecting a heavy-handed hierarchy is all but unavoidable. The chancel has become the place for the Holy Action, the Holy Stuff, and the Holy People; The nave is for the rest of us. The foot soldiers. The “grunts”.

And such a space is tough on community. In most nave-and-chancel churches, all you see is the back of someone’s head.

So that’s the first problem with a strongly axial, two-room worship space. It signals Hierarchy in a day when the Church needs a sense of egalitarianism, needs a validation of the Baptismal Vocation of the Laity, needs a visual, spacial reminder of the Priesthood of All Believers.

Of course, I hear you arguing, “what the Church needs today” is anybody’s judgement call. Does our Church today — Does our world today! — need yet another reminder of the power of the Powerful? Yet another admonishment from totalitarian Authority? Or does our Church, our world, need a model of truly egalitarian democracy, where each one’s vocation is honoured? It’s a question much older than Dostoevski’s *Grand Inquisitor*. You’re getting here my own personal judgement call on that apologetic question.

The second problem with worship in a nave-and-chancel Church is this: It’s Presentational. It’s like a theatre. Up there on the chancel — on the platform, on the stage — are the performers, presenting something for the rest of us down here in the nave — the audience. Something *we don’t have*, down here in the nave. Something they presumably *do* have, up there in the chancel.

I choose the term “presentational” quite deliberately, because that’s the word often used by champions of mega-churches to describe their style of worship: It’s presentational worship, they’ll claim. It’s worship designed to present the Gospel to people who don’t have it.

But note: The term becomes a betrayal of what they’re really about: Revivalism. It’s a Nineteenth Century revival meeting in Twenty-First Century glitz. So-called “worship experiences” in mega-church settings most often do not reflect the catholic Tradition of worship “from faith to faith.” Sure, our assemblies are full of people who have not appropriated the Gospel. But the catholic — small “c” — insistence has always been that Christian worship assumes there’s faith out there, as well as ignorance or unbelief. “Catholic” worship will always be an experience that builds on the faith that’s there. Whatever faith is there. Wherever you find it.

And let’s face it: There’s faith and un-faith on both sides of the chancel rail, on both sides of the pulpit. Every Sunday. Faith and un-faith: You can find both, in clergy as

well as in laity. And truly “catholic” worship nurtures both.

So. The reforms of Vatican 2 were designed 1) to lessen that sense of hierarchy implicit in nave-and-chancel churches, and 2) to do away with the implication there that clergy were presenting something to laity that laity don’t have.

So let’s take that altar away from the East wall, and turn that altar around, and let’s have the priest presiding at Eucharist *versus populum*, across from the people. Now we’re in Stage Two architectural reform. And it happened overnight, all around the world, in Roman Catholic church buildings, following the reforms of Vatican 2.

It happened less dramatically, if at all, in most Protestant churches. See Essay # 2 above. Many Protestant worship spaces remain to this day steadfastly un-modified: Two-room buildings sending their unfortunate signals of hierarchy and theatre, Sunday after Sunday, week after week, year after year. No wonder Protestant congregations today are often so impotent and dispirited!

The change from a Stage One space to a Stage Two space requires, in many cases, nothing more complicated, architecturally, than pulling that East-wall altar away from its place against the wall, and positioning it free-standing in the chancel. If the altar is bolted there against the East wall, a portable table can be set up as altar closer to the people. In that case, use the “high altar” as credence.

But you will have a major educational job to do. You’ll be attempting to alter people’s pieties, and that’s a job for slow and sensitive pastoral preparation.

In the situation I describe in [Essay 81](#), the congregation actually elected to extend their “chancel” into the transept crossing by building a new platform for a free-standing altar, thrusting their Holy Space right into the peoples’ laps. The old chancel was utilized now as a chapel for small group worship.

Versus populum presidency at a free-standing altar close to the people enjoys a three-fold historic precedence. First, it recalls the persecuted primitive Christian community, where small groups of worshippers gathered in the homes of members, around the dining room table, as you could say, led in Word and Sacrament by their bishop or presbyter. Second, the pope in Rome has always enjoyed the privilege of presiding *versus populum* in St. Peter’s. Michelangelo’s grand design for that enormous space originally featured the plan of a Greek cross — all four arms equal in length — with the altar precisely at the crossing of the transepts. Third, the tradition of Presbyterian Reformers often included a free-standing Table altar with leaders arrayed behind it, facing the people across the Table.

As one wag remarks, there is not much in Christian Tradition of which you may say it is primitive, papal, and Presbyterian!

How long this arrangement pertained in that parish I do not know. Because, over time, that congregation apparently came to believe that their building still remained a basically two-room space. Hence: Stage Three.

In Stage Three, the congregation abandoned its former chancel (as at Stage One), and abandoned also its more recent transept platform (Stage Two), and placed its altar right in the middle of the nave, on the people's level, at the edge of the transept, on a huge and handsome oriental rug. The old pews had still been retained: They're positioned now in parallel ranks along North and South walls, transforming the space into a choir or collegiate setting, the people facing each other across a wide centre aisle.

Ambo for reading and preaching the Word is also located in the centre aisle, toward the West, opposite the Table on the same axis. The font is honoured in its own space, the South transept providing a magnificent baptistry. Sedilia (seats) for worship leaders are positioned behind the altar on the nave level (the peoples' level).

What's great about Stage Three? It incarnates Immanence, for one thing. It's perhaps not as successful as Stage One in setting forth Transcendence. But, as I have already suggested above, God's Transcendence is a sermon for another age than ours. Ours is an age hungering for a sense of Immanence: God with us, within us, among us, in our midst. Stage Three is a one-room space. The entire nave has become chancel. We're all invited to participate as actors "on stage".

For another thing, Stage Three is great for building community. It's hard to avoid a sense of mutual caring when you can look across and through the Holy Space you're in and see that Aunt Minnie isn't in her usual seat: Is she sick?

I'm well aware that your parish, faithful reader, may not be in any position to implement Stage Three tomorrow. But if you have a chance to re-model — if, heaven forbid, your church interior burns out, and you want to rebuild — then by all means consider Stage Three. The times cry out for it.

A case study: My own Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia chapel has recently been remodeled so as to reflect Stage Three. It's magnificent. Constrained by a square-ish Nineteenth Century Neo-Gothic ground plan, with a recessed alcove-chancel, the re-configuration breathes with space and light. The old alcove-chancel now serves as location for the choir, or as meditation chapel. Disposition of the arrangement in the nave is completely flexible. Sturdy stacking chairs and a handsome table altar and ambo may be positioned according to the ritual needs of the moment. Only the font is permanently placed, between flanking entrances in the West end, on a handsome pavement of ceramic tiles. I include two photos below, 1) looking East toward the old chancel, and 2) looking West toward the entrance doors.



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