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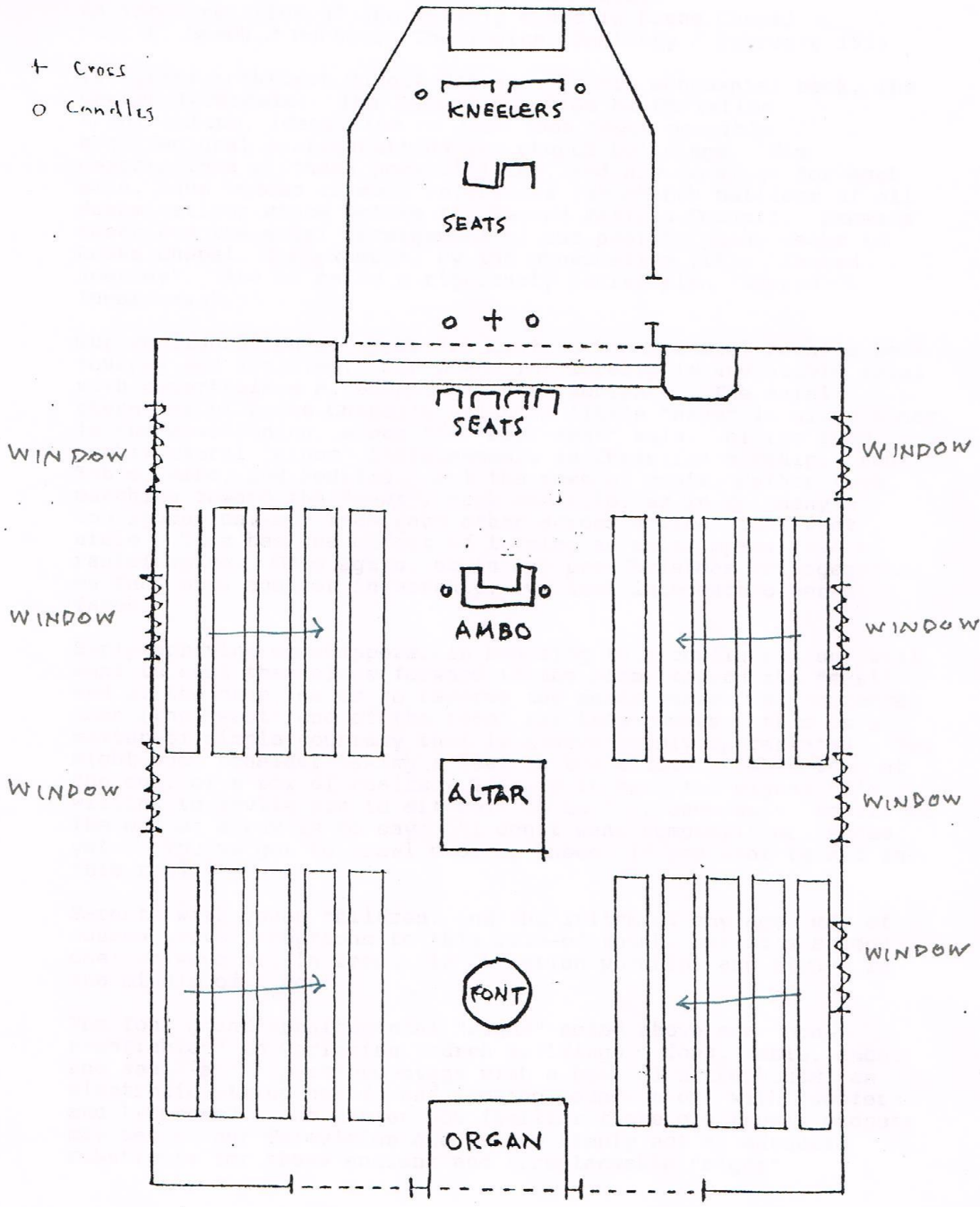
## **SILENT SERMON; SACRED SPACE: LENT**

A With this posting I continue my four part series on re-configuring existing church spaces. This posting is the third in this series. The first was Essay 252 “Silent Sermon...Advent”. The second was Essay 254 “Silent Sermon...Post-Epiphany.” A fourth and final posting will consider “Silent Sermon...Easter”.

B In each case, the space I am using as illustration is Loehe Chapel at Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa, where I spent an interim academic year as Dean of the Chapel and lecturer in worship, church hymnody, and church architecture.

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LENT 1996



- 1 The great architect Rudolph Schwarz, in his monumental book, *The Church Incarnate: The Sacred Function of Christian Architecture*, identifies no fewer than seven possible architectural configurations for church buildings. His descriptions of these possibilities, and his drawings for each plan, have become classic references for church builders of all denominations since before the Second Vatican Council of the 1960's
- 2 Schwarz describes the axial arrangement of our post-Epiphany weeks in Loehe Chapel, for example, by the provocative title "Sacred Journey". And he calls a rigorously radial plan "Sacred Inwardness".
- 3 Our configuration of space for Lent in Loehe Chapel recalls both journey and arriving. Our place for worship is undeniably axial, with nevertheless a redeeming radial ambiance. The axial character of Loehe Chapel's splendid little "nave" is given honour in the positioning, along the central "East - West" axis, of the four architectural "signs" indispensable in Christian worship: Font, Table, Ambo and Sedilia.
- 4 But the rows of seats, rather than marching toward the "East", rank and file, as in Epiphany's configuration, now face each other across a wide "East - West" aisle. This has the effect of turning an axial space into a radial space. Once again, as in our pre-Christmas arrangements, we face one another in worship. We look into each other's faces.
- 5 Early-arriving worshippers, in honouring this configuration, will want to seat themselves forward in the room, toward the "East" end of the nave, so as to reserve the seats nearer the entrance door (the "West" end of the room) for late-comers. This is a matter of simple courtesy that is always warmly appreciated.
- 6 You might even consider taking a seat in the middle, rather than at the end, of a row of chairs. This is to send the signal "I'm willing to invite you to sit next to me." Conversely, to sit at the end of a row is to say: "I don't want company!" or worse yet, "You've got to crawl over my knees, if you want to sit in this row!"
- 7 Parents with young children, and the infirm of any age, may of course prove exceptions to this rule-of-thumb, but it's a good one: Always sit in front, in Christian worship, to signal your complete engagement in what's happening. And always sit in the middle of a row!
- 8 The four grand architectural "signs" noted above are "non-negotiables" in Christian church buildings: Font, Table, Ambo, and Sedilia.
- 9 A platform-stage with a bank of microphones, an electronic mixing board, looming sound-boxes, and an enormous projection screen – no matter how familiar these electronic gadgets may be, in our Television Age – are simply not an adequate substitute for these ancient and irreplaceable "signs".
- 10 A word about Ambo and Sedilia is in order. The term "Ambo" may be unfamiliar to some. It is from the Greek, meaning "a raised place", or even "on an edge", and can refer to either Pulpit or Lectern. Current liturgical piety suggests that there be but one Place of the Word, not two. There is no persuasive theological or liturgical reason why scriptures should not be both read and proclaimed, that is, from the same location. A

single Ambo or reading-desk is sufficient, and indeed preferable, to any Pulpit-and-Lectern configurations.

11 And the Sedilia (Latin for “seat”) is yet another important architectural “sign” in Christian worship. Here are the seats or chairs of the worship leaders, where worshippers may expect to look for cues as to whether they should stand or sit.

12 More than one liturgical scholar suggests that in the early church, the seat of the presider was as important as the Table-Altar. For worship leaders to sit among worshippers and thus effectively to hide from their view represents a false egalitarianism.

13 Sorry, seminarians. It is one of the burdens of worship leadership for you to be visible “up-front” at all times!

14 One more thing: We’re fortunate in being able to utilize the old “chancel”, during this penitential season, as a kind of “confessional chapel”, equipped with chairs and kneelers for Thursday evening’s opportunity for Confession and Forgiveness. For privacy, a portable tri-fold or quad-fold screen might appropriately be put in place at the entrance to the “confessional chapel”, at the top step of the chancel, on Thursday nights only.

15 The kneelers remain, throughout the week, as a visual reminder of Lent’s disciplines.

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