

Inside our sacred space

For most of us, entering our parish church is like walking into our home. We know where everything is located, the pictures on the wall, the furniture, our favorite seat. Even when we go to another church, the surroundings are so similar that we are not strangers.

Each of the objects, the surroundings in our Catholic churches, has a purpose and a history. Here is an overview of some of those sacred areas, objects and surroundings.

May we always seek the mysteries, beauty and love of Christ found in our sacred place.

Gathering Space (Narthex)

The gathering space, frequently called the narthex, is the place where the faithful greet one another before and after Mass. It is the area between the outside doors of the church and the inner doors leading into the worship space. This is where we are welcomed each Sunday, where baptisms, funerals and weddings begin; here we form lines for processions and receive palms. It is a place for religious literature and for parish notices or displays.

In the early history of the Church, the narthex was a waiting area for unbaptized individuals and penitents not allowed inside the worship space and not allowed to participate in all or part of the Mass. Through the centuries the restrictions on Mass attendance have been relaxed, but the term “narthex” remains.

In the gathering space we, at least mentally, discard our secular ways, knowing that we are about to enter holy ground and that our attitude, body language and even our attire reflect the sacredness therein.

** The word "narthex" in Greek means "giant funnel."*

1. Nave

The part of a Catholic Church where the laity prays and worships is called the nave. The word "nave" comes from the Latin "*navis*," meaning ship. We, the people of God, are regarded as passengers on a ship destined for heaven. The nave is not a meeting place but a place of worship; the congregation is not an audience but participants in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

In most churches today, the nave is filled with pews or chairs. That was not always the case. For over 1,000 years, churches did not have seats for the congregation; the faithful mostly stood or knelt during the Mass. Not only did they stand, but they were separated by gender. Men were normally on the right facing the altar and women were on the left.

Not until the 13th century did pews or benches become popular; still today there are Catholic churches without seats, save a few designated for the old and the infirm. Parishes quickly discovered that pews are an expensive addition and the cost of installation was passed on to parishioners. Pews were purchased or rented by the laity and often regarded as the property of a particular person or family. This idea persisted for centuries. Today we may contribute to pew renovation or installation, but we don't own a particular pew (although many of us seek to sit in the same spot at every Mass).

** The separation of men and women continued in some Catholic churches up through the 20th century.*

2. Sanctuary

"They shall make a sanctuary for me, that I may dwell in their midst" (Ex 25:8).

The sanctuary is the area, often raised, in the front of the church where the altar, the ambo, the celebrant's chair and, in many churches, the tabernacle are located. Separated from the nave, this is the place reminiscent of the Holy of the Holies, that is, the inner sanctuary of the temple described in the Old Testament. Interestingly, the altar and tabernacle were centuries apart in their introduction into the Church.

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal defines the sanctuary as "the place where the altar stands, where the word of God is proclaimed, and where the priest, the deacon and other ministers exercise their offices" (No. 295).

** The sanctuary's elevation above the nave floor serves to enhance the view of the laity but also exemplifies a special, sacred place*

3. Altar

The altar is the centerpiece, the most important part of the church to which everything else is subservient. Every Catholic church is built for the altar. Altars have been part of religious services going back to antiquity, even before churches were built; the name altar is derived from a Hebrew word meaning "place of sacrifice."

Well into the fourth century, there were no churches nor public worship. Christians held their divine services away from the occupying Romans in places like private homes. Often the altar was a simple wooden table or chest.

The top of the altar, called the *mensa*, a Latin word for table, traditionally has been made of stone. The altar is consecrated by a bishop and becomes the symbol of Christ: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone" (Mt 21:42).

The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines the altar: "On

the altar, which is the center of the church, the sacrifice of the cross is made present under sacramental signs. The altar is also the table of the Lord, to which the People of God are invited" (No. 1182). Here for us is Mount Calvary; here too, the bread and wine are turned into the body and blood of Christ.

** In the early Church, altars were built on the sites of martyrs' graves. As more churches were built, relics were contained in or buried under altars, a practice that still occurs today.*

4. Tabernacle

Since there were no churches during those early centuries, Christians did not have a tabernacle. However, as we do today, they were careful to protect the Blessed Sacrament. There is some evidence that following their divine services, Christians took the consecrated bread home and consumed it during the week. By the fourth century, when construction of churches began, any reserved hosts were kept in various rooms in the church, including an area that became known as the sacristy. Theft, pilferage or worse was a serious threat, especially following the Protestant Reformation, when violence was carried out against the Catholic Church.

The design of the tabernacle slowly evolved, and by the 16th century tabernacles similar to those we have today were in use. Canon Law spells out the rules for the tabernacle's location: "The tabernacle in which the Blessed Eucharist is reserved should be sited in a distinguished place in the church or oratory, a place which is conspicuous, suitably adorned and conducive to prayer" (No. 938.2). As authorized by Church law, and approved by the local bishop, some churches use a separate chapel to house the tabernacle. The tendency today is to keep the tabernacle in proximity to the altar.

** Wherever located, the tabernacle is always locked and*

immoveable in order to protect the Eucharist.

5. Sanctuary Lamp

In every Catholic church we find a readily visible lamp or candle burning before the tabernacle. This is the same light the Magi followed until they found the baby Jesus in a stable. This ever-present light still beckons to each of us. We all look for the flickering flame as soon as we enter the church. Our attitude and demeanor change as we recognize that we are in the house of the living God. The flame signifies his presence and a sign that our love for the Lord is eternal, never to be extinguished.

Called the sanctuary lamp, it was first used in the 13th century, and Canon Law 940 requires the lamp to burn continuously. This perpetual light is mentioned in Leviticus 6:6 in discussing the fire for burnt offerings: "Fire shall be kept burning upon the altar continuously; it shall not go out."

** The flame of the tabernacle lamp is purposely transferred from candle to candle beginning with the fire lit at the Easter Vigil Mass.*

6. Ambo

During the Mass, the ambo is the focal point for the Liturgy of the Word. From this kind of tall, elevated desk, "only the readings, the responsorial psalm and Easter proclamation (*Exsultet*) are to be proclaimed; it may be used also for giving the homily and for announcing the intentions of the prayer of the faithful" (General Instruction of the Roman Missal, No. 309). The design and location of the altar and ambo emphasize the close relationship between the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist: from the holy altar we receive the body and blood of Christ, and from the ambo,

Christ's holy doctrine. In this regard the ambo, like the altar, is not just an object but a sacred place.

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal also explains: "The dignity of the word of God requires that the church have a place that is suitable for the proclamation of the word and toward which the attention of the whole congregation of the faithful naturally turns during the Liturgy of the Word."

Once the persecution of Christians ended in the fourth century, churches were built and designed with an ambo or raised platform, making it easier for the congregation to hear. Around the ninth century, the pulpit replaced the ambo and was located either in the sanctuary or the nave.

** Typically, early Church ambos had steps going up each side with an area at the top big enough for the reader and servers with candles to stand.*

7. Celebrant's Chair

During the Mass, the priest represents Our Lord Jesus, persona Christi, and thus the priest's chair always is distinguishable from other seats in the church. The chair is not designed as the place for a king; it is not a royal throne, not palatial, but it is easily differentiated from other chairs in the sanctuary and recognized as the place for the one who leads the congregation. The chair is always placed so to be seen from the nave. "The chair of the priest celebrant must signify his office of presiding over the gathering and directing the prayer" (GIRM, No. 310).

** In a cathedral, the chair is known as the cathedra. This chair is from which the bishop exercises both his teaching authority and role as a successor of the apostles.*

8. Images, Statues and Relics

Statues and pictures of Jesus, the Blessed Mother and the saints adorn nearly every church. Catholics don't pray to or worship statues; rather we venerate, we admire, respect and seek to imitate the individual emulated in the statue. We worship our living Lord, Jesus Christ, not his statue. The saints depicted in our churches lived lives of heroic virtue and are now in heaven, where they can intercede for us before God.

The statues, pictures, even the stained-glass windows, tell about Jesus and the Scriptures. These images have long been an important educational tool, especially in the first 1,500 years of Christianity when few people were literate.

Relics are treated in a similar way, as best explained by St. Jerome (340-420): "We do not worship, we do not adore, for fear that we should bow down to the creature rather than to the Creator, but we venerate the relics of the martyr in order the better to adore him whose martyrs they are."

** The Second Council of Nicea and the Council of Trent reiterated that the faithful venerate the person represented by the image and not the image itself.*

9. Baptismal Font

Baptism is the door to all the Church's sacraments. The baptistry or baptismal font is part of every Catholic Church and located so that the congregation can participate in the baptismal ceremony.

Some fonts are large pools with free-flowing water and normally found as you enter the nave; others are smaller and placed in different locations.

The early converts to Christianity were baptized in rivers,

streams, public baths, some even in the catacombs. For the most part, it wasn't until the fourth century with the construction of churches that baptisms were brought indoors.

Over the centuries, even until recently, the receptacle used for baptisms has been continuously reduced in size. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' document "Built on Living Stones" says for each parish that, "One font that will accommodate the baptism of both infants and adults symbolizes the one faith and one baptism that Christians share."

** The Church today approves the use of either triple immersion for baptism or the pouring of water three times over the candidate's head.*

10. Easter Candle

The Easter (or Paschal) candle is located near the baptismal font, the exception being during the Easter season when it is placed next to the ambo. Originating around the fourth century, this large candle represents the light of Christ, and a new Paschal candle is blessed during each Easter Vigil. It is lit for every baptism, and the flame, the light of Christ, is transferred to a candle given to the baptized individual or to an adult family member when an infant is baptized.

** The Easter candle is also lit during a funeral, recognizing that the deceased shared in the death and resurrection of Jesus at their baptism.*

11. Sacristy

From the Latin word *sacristra*, meaning a room near the sanctuary or church entrance, this room contains the bread and wine, sacred vessels, the books, the vestments, everything needed in the celebration of the Mass. It is the location where the priests and ministers vest. The sacristy was part of

the church since the first places of public worship were built in the fourth century. Here the sacred vessels are cleaned after Mass.

** In most sacristies there is a sacrarium, a sink that drains directly into the earth where water from cleaning the vessels is poured.*

12. Stations of the Cross

In nearly every Catholic Church, 14 Stations of the Cross ring the walls of the nave. We can walk along with Jesus as he makes the agonizing journey from Pilate's house to his crucifixion on Calvary that first Good Friday. We halt at each station meditating on the actual or traditional events that took place at that particular spot. This most popular devotion evolved over several centuries. While many Catholics participate in this devotion every Friday of Lent, the stations are available for us to "walk" any time.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' document "Built on Living Stones" states: "Traditionally the stations have been arranged around the walls of the nave of the church, or, in some instances around the gathering space or even the exterior of the church making the devotion as a true journey."

** The Stations of the Cross varied in number until Pope Clement XII (r. 1730-40) settled on 14 and identified the events associated with each station.*

13. Ambry for Holy Oils

Each church stores holy oils for use in various ceremonies. New oils are blessed annually during Holy Week by the bishop at the chrism Mass and then distributed to parishes. The oils are: the oil of the catechumens, the oil of the sick and the chrism. They are kept locked in an ambry, a French word

meaning wall safe or cupboard. Our Catechism says, "The sacred chrism (myron), used in anointings as the sacramental sign of the seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit, is traditionally reserved and venerated in a secure place in the sanctuary. The oil of catechumens and the oil of the sick may also be placed there" (CCC, No. 1183).

** Today the ambry takes different forms and shapes and often is located near the baptismal font.*

14. Confessional(s)

The first Christians confessed their sins face to face to a bishop in his church and in some instances to the congregation. Public confessions were short-lived and stopped by Pope Leo I (r. 440-461), who wrote: "It is sufficient that the guilt which people have on their consciences be made known to the priests alone in secret confession."

Face-to-face confession, typically kneeling before a priest or sitting in a chair at his side, was the norm until the middle ages when a screen was placed between the confessor and female penitents. This action eventually led to the introduction of the confessional booth in the 16th century, which included the screen separation, and from that time until the Second Vatican Council, confessions were normally anonymous. In 1974, the Church introduced a new formula for confession, which promoted a reconciliation room instead of a confessional booth. Penitents could now go to confession face to face or behind a screen.

** Parish penance services, primarily held during Lent and Advent, are products of Vatican II.*

D.D. Emmons writes from Pennsylvania.