

# THE CHAIR, THE AMBO, AND THE ALTAR: AN EXPRESSION OF THE TRIA MUNERA

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# THE CHAIR, THE AMBO, AND THE ALTAR: AN EXPRESSION OF THE TRIA MUNERA

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**Abstract:** This thesis is founded on the ecclesiological premise that the way in which the chair of the priest celebrant, the ambo, and the altar, are shaped and placed in a church greatly informs sacred worship and can either hinder or promote active participation or separation between ordained ministers and laity. What is the ideal arrangement of the sacred space? This work aims to uncover the history and theology of each axis of the liturgy (chair, ambo, altar), and link them to the *munera* received in Baptism and Holy Orders in order to present a liturgically inspired arrangement of the sacred space. Finally, a case study of a recently built church will be presented to support the conclusion.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Table of Contents</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1.0 Chapter 1 - The Chair as the Symbol of the <i>Munus Regendi</i></b>	<b>6</b>
1.1 Introduction	6
1.2 The Chair throughout history	7
1.3 The Chair in the Official Church Documents	13
1.4 The Chair and the <i>Munus Regendi</i>	18
1.5 Practical considerations	21
1.6 Criticism and negative understanding	25
1.7 Conclusion	29
1.8 Appendix - Figures	30
<b>2.0 Chapter 2 - The Ambo as the Symbol of the <i>Munus Docendi</i></b>	<b>34</b>
2.1 Introduction	34
2.2 The Ambo throughout history	36
2.3 The Ambo in the official Church Documents	39
2.4 The Ambo and the <i>Munus Docendi</i>	44
2.5 Practical considerations	47
2.6 Conclusion	51
2.7 Appendix - Figures	52
<b>3.0 Chapter 3 - The Altar as the Symbol of the <i>Munus Santificandi</i></b>	<b>54</b>
3.1 Introduction	54
3.2 The Altar throughout history	56
3.3 The Altar in the official Church Documents	60
3.4 The Altar and the <i>Munus Santificandi</i>	67
3.5 Practical considerations	70
3.6 Conclusion	75
3.7 Appendix - Figures	76
<b>4.0 Chapter 4 - Case Study</b>	<b>80</b>
4.1 Introduction	80
4.2 Cathedral of Our Lady of Arabia in Bahrain	80
4.3 Appendix - Figures	87
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>90</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>96</b>

## INTRODUCTION

Opening the second session of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI raised an important question: “*Ecclesia, quid dicis de te ipsa?* Church, what do you say about yourself?”<sup>1</sup> The four Constitutions, nine Decrees, and three Declarations produced by the Council are an attempt to answer this question. What are the practical consequences of this answer? Sixty years have passed since Vatican II and the Church finds herself still striving to fully implement the reform. The recoveries and innovations of the Council can only be understood within the framework of the ecclesiology proposed by the Council fathers. In 2001, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger said that up until War World I, “the Church appeared to be essentially a centrally governed institution which one stubbornly defended, but which somehow still confronted one only from the outside.”<sup>2</sup> Yet, the Church is much more, it is an organism of the Holy Spirit, a living being, a person “truly present in all legitimately organized local groups of the faithful, which, insofar as they are united to their pastors, are quite appropriately called Churches in the New Testament.”<sup>3</sup> Cardinal Ratzinger claims that a Eucharistic ecclesiology, or communio-ecclesiology, is “the core of the teaching of the Second Vatican Council on the Church, and at the same time the central element the Council wished to convey.”<sup>4</sup> What makes a local community the Church, is the legitimate administration of the Sacraments and especially of the

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<sup>1</sup> Karol Wojtyła, *Sources of Renewal: The Implementation of the Second Vatican Council* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), 420.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, “The Ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council” (September 15, 2001). In *EWTN*. Accessed October 19, 2022.

<https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/ecclesiology-of-vatican-ii-2069>

<sup>3</sup> Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* (21 November 1964) § 26, at The Holy See. Accessed October 19, 2022.

[https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html)

<sup>4</sup> Ratzinger, “The Ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council.”

Eucharist: “the Eucharist joins men [and women] together, not only with one another but also with Christ thus making them Church.”<sup>5</sup> The Eucharist is the condition *sine qua non* for the Church to be present in her fullness.

In more recent times, Pope Francis responded to the same question posed by Pope Paul VI with his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*. In it, the Pope presented an ecclesiology very much consonant with the Council and wished to promote the active participation of the whole People of God in the mission of Christ.<sup>6</sup> His ecclesiological view is evident throughout his pontificate, as Francis denounces a clerical and hierarchical vision of the Church in favor of a community of missionary disciples, sent to announce the Good News by virtue of their Baptism.<sup>7</sup> These very important statements “relate directly to the sacramentality and sign value of what the church is before God and for the world, and directly, therefore, to the church’s witness and mission.”<sup>8</sup> Ratzinger and Francis present diverse accents in ecclesiology, one focusing on the sacraments, and especially the Eucharist, as the condition for communion, and the other focusing more on the common mission of all the baptized. Yet, what emerges is that the Church has not a hierarchical nor elitist structure, but rather a people united by a new nature and purpose given by God in Jesus Christ.

How is the ecclesiology of Vatican II pastorally implemented in visible and practical terms? As the adage goes, *lex orandi, lex credendi*: “the Church’s teaching is articulated and

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November, 2013), § 25. At The Holy See. Accessed October 19, 2022.

[https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html)

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Evangelii Gaudium* § 102, § 120.

<sup>8</sup> Paul D. Murray, “Ecclesia et Pontifice: On Delivering on the Ecclesiological Implications of *Evangelii Gaudium*,” in *Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium, and the renewal of the church*, ed. Duncan Dormor and Alana Harris (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 2017), 93.

made manifest in the celebration of the liturgy and prayer.”<sup>9</sup> The way Christians celebrate reveals what the ecclesial community believes. Consequently, since liturgical spaces shape the liturgy, the way in which they are arranged is not simply a matter of beauty or pragmatism, but a way to communicate the Church’s faith through symbols; the liturgy reflects the life of the Church. Since the liturgical reform set in motion by Vatican II is a direct consequence of its proposed ecclesiology, a church can be defined as a built ecclesiology, the embodiment of Christian faith.

Liturgical spaces are always built with a purpose in mind, not only based on aesthetics. If the purpose of a building is to serve the celebrating community, then, first of all, there must be a thorough theological reflection on the parish community, the pastoral work of the parish, and the renewal envisioned by the Church through the Second Vatican Council. Church buildings must facilitate greater participation in the liturgies and foster the faith of those who worship. This endeavor is accomplished through the use of symbols that provoke a reaction from the beholder.<sup>10</sup>

Symbols differ from signs: on the one hand, signs give information or offer direction; on the other hand, symbols convey a plurality of meaning, they transcend the sign. Among these symbols, there are three that could be considered the axis of Christian liturgy: the chair, the ambo, and the altar. These are not simply pieces of furniture, but they say *something*. Louis-

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<sup>9</sup> Rick Hilgartner, *Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi: The Word of God in the Celebration of the Sacraments* (20 September 2009), at Washington, D.C. Accessed October 19, 2022.

<https://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/how-we-teach/catechesis/catechetical-sunday/word-of-god/upload/lex-orandi-lex-credendi.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Cf. USCCB, *Built of Living Stones. Art, Architecture, and Worship* (Washington, D.C. 2005), § 22; Richard Vosko, *Art and Architecture for Congregational Worship: the search for a Common Ground* (Collegeville, MN: Ignatius Press, 2019), 23, 80; Steven Schloeder, *Architecture in Common* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1998), 168-169.

Marie Chauvet, in his *Symbol and Sacraments*, points out that “the symbol does not refer, as does the sign, to something of another order than itself; rather, its function is to introduce us into an order to which it itself belongs, and order presupposed to be an order of meaning in its radical otherness.[...] The symbol introduces us into a cultural realm to which it belongs inasmuch as it is a symbol.”<sup>11</sup> Signs belong to cognition; symbols to recognition, they are evocative. Their shape and placement within a church express the ecclesiology of the Church and set the tone for the whole liturgy celebrated by members of the Christian community, lay and ordained. Yet, what is the message that the symbolic axes of the liturgical space try to convey?

The Church teaches that through the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Orders, *munera* (offices or duties) are bestowed upon the recipients: they are called to govern, to teach, and to sanctify. There is a participation yet distinction of the *munera* as received by the faithful and the ordained ministers. The *munera* received by the faithful enable them to be modeled after Christ and to truly become the Body of Christ. In addition to these, ordained ministers receive special *munera* that are a direct participation in Christ himself as *persona Christi Capitis*, conferred in service to the common priesthood to exercise the mission of Christ the head. In this thesis, references will be made to the parochial church, headed by ordained ministers, and the domestic church, headed by Christian spouses.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence* (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1995), 132-133.

<sup>12</sup> The Church is made up of many members, including not only the parochial church and the domestic church, but also single people, consecrated people, ordained ministers with other assignments other than the parish, etc. Nevertheless, for the sake of this thesis and by reason of length, this work will focus only on Christian spouses and ordained ministers assigned to a parish.

Cf. John Paul II, *Gratissimam Sane*, Letter to Families (2 February 1994), §3. At The Holy See. Accessed January 7, 2023.

[https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1994/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_let\\_02021994\\_families.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_02021994_families.html)

Cf. John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation (25 March 1992), §41. At The Holy See. Accessed March 7, 2022.

[https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_25031992\\_pastores-dabo-vobis.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_25031992_pastores-dabo-vobis.html)



This work aims to link the theology of the *munera* with the main symbols used in a liturgical space. Since both lay and ordained ministers take part in the sacred liturgies and their participation revolves around the three axes of the liturgy (chair, ambo, and altar), it is my belief that these symbols can be enlightened by the theology of the *munera*: king, prophet, and priest.

## **1.0 THE CHAIR AS THE SYMBOL OF THE *MUNUS REGENDI***

### **1.1 INTRODUCTION**

When my father was alive, the seat at the head of the dining table was almost sacred. It was my father's seat, and nobody would ever think or dare to sit on his chair, as our seat was on the long benches alongside the table. His seat was much more than just a chair. It signified my father's role and duty within the family, the duty of the shepherd. I remember clearly how he would lead us all in prayer and then begin the conversation at the table, ask questions, and use the family meals as occasions to talk to his children and guide them. The more I think about it, the more I see how he used the family table as a place to exercise his mission within the domestic church entrusted to him by God.

After my father died in 1997, something interesting happened. As my mother never sat at the table with us, my oldest brother, Francesco, took my father's seat. By doing so, he implicitly said that he had understood and accepted a new role within the family. It was never a matter of power, but a matter of service. He understood that, at that time, the family needed him to step up. When he got married and left the house, one brother or sister after another took that seat, and to this day, the oldest sibling having a meal in my home occupies my father's chair.

The way in which my family saw my father's chair can be useful to enlighten the importance of the chair of the priest celebrant in a church.<sup>13</sup> What does it symbolize? Where should it be placed? Who should sit on it? Is it a symbol of inequality with the assembly? Does it represent a hierarchical view of the Church? Is it a sign of clericalism? These are just a few of the questions gravitating around this issue.

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<sup>13</sup> Although my preferred term is "presider's chair," I will mostly refer to it as "the chair of the priest celebrant," following the language employed by the official documents of the Catholic Church.

The purpose of this chapter is to survey the history of the chair of the priest celebrant and its symbolic meaning. After that, the work will turn to the chair as the ideal locus from where the kingly *munus* is exercised, not in a despotic or tyrannical fashion, but truly following the example of Christ the good shepherd. As the old saying goes, we can only love what we know. I am confident that learning about its history and meaning can help both presiders and the assembly to engage in the active participation so much encouraged by the Second Vatican Council and intentionally exercise the *munus regendi* in service to the people entrusted by God.

## 1.2 THE CHAIR THROUGHOUT HISTORY

According to French theologian Louis Bouyer, church architecture can only be truly appreciated within the context in which it was born. Thus, in his *Church and Architecture*, he claims that “the Church has its immediate preparation in the Jewish synagogue.”<sup>14</sup> This statement may be true for many aspects of Christian worship. But is the chair of the priest celebrant an organic development of Jewish worship? Bouyer believed so, since archeological discoveries of the time revealed that the synagogue was organized around two focuses: “the seat of Moses” and “the Ark.” Apparently, the assembly would gather around the centrally located “seat of Moses” from where the rabbis taught “the authentic depositary of the living tradition of God’s word, first given to Moses.”<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, his reconstruction has since been contested. Only three *cathedrae*, all dating to the fourth or fifth century C.E., have been found in Roman-Byzantine Palestine: at Ḥammat Tiberias, Chorazim, and ‘En Gedi.<sup>16</sup> The “seat of Moses” is also absent in the recently discovered first-century synagogue at Magdala. Since the seat of Moses was not a

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<sup>14</sup> Luis Bouyer, *Liturgy and Architecture*, (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967), 9.

<sup>15</sup> Bouyer, 11.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years*, 2. ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 348-349.

universal feature of the synagogue, the organic development from the “seat of Moses” into the “seat of the bishop” seems farfetched.<sup>17</sup>

If the Jewish milieu does not provide a conclusive answer, the next step is to investigate the most ancient Christian buildings. Second and third-generation Christians were faced with three crises: the fall of Jerusalem, the delay of Jesus’s coming, and the death of the first Apostles.<sup>18</sup> Their concern for the survival of the Church and its authenticity gave life to presbyter-bishops as authoritative residential leaders for the communities.<sup>19</sup> Their responsibility was to oversee and regulate the community life, administer its fiscal resources, and teach sound doctrine.<sup>20</sup> Communities would gather in houses rearranged for worship, like the Dura-Europos church. This house church is the earliest one yet discovered. Its space was divided into several rooms dedicated to liturgical needs and frescos decorated the walls. Unfortunately, there is no evidence of how the assembly with its altar, ambo, and chair, was arranged and it provides no further clues to our inquiry.<sup>21</sup>

The conversion of Constantine and the Edict of Milan (313) changed everything. From small assemblies that gathered in households, Christians now gathered in Imperial Basilicas (fig. 1) and a new triumphalistic notion of Christianity began to develop. The bishop and presbyters, since then-guarantors of the deposit of faith in service to the community, became officials of the state and administrators of great buildings. Their role was mingled with the politics and issues of the Empire and this new view was quickly embodied in the liturgical setting for the celebrations, as “the seat of the bishop [was] brought into the center of the apse and that is now a throne: not

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. L. Y. Rahmani, “*Stone Synagogue Chairs: Their Identification, Use and Significance*,” in “*Exploration Journal* 40, No. 2/3,” (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1990), 192-193.

<sup>18</sup> Nathan Mitchell, *Mission and Ministry: History and Theology in the Sacrament of Order* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, INC, 1982), 198.

<sup>19</sup> Mitchell, 198.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Mitchell, 156.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Jen A. Baird, *Dura-Europos* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

just a teacher's *cathedra* but the seat of honor of a high dignitary"<sup>22</sup>. Thus, it could be argued that the origin of clericalism and of the hierarchical tension that we still experience at times in the Church today began here, and the position of the chair could be seen as a symbol of that development. As Bouyer explains, the institutionalization of the Church and the clergy within the Roman Empire gave rise to "the new separation, instead of a mere distinction, between clergy and faithful."<sup>23</sup> Although it seems that the origin of the chair for the priest celebrant is to be found in an institutionalized and political Imperial Church, not all liturgical historians agree with this position.<sup>24</sup>

Thanks to fourth-century churches such as Saint Pudenziana, other liturgists trace the origin of the presider's chair to Christ himself. Pedro Farnés-Scherer, a leading member of the Commission for Liturgy in Spain and disciple of Dom Bernard Botte, clarifies that "the early Christian communities took delight in the contemplation of Christ as Teacher and Doctor and they represented Him often as such sitting on a chair."<sup>25</sup> Farnés' claim is supported by artistic representations of Christ sitting on a throne teaching and leading his people found in several early churches.<sup>26</sup> The mosaic of Saint Pudenziana (fig. 2), one of the most ancient mosaics found in Rome, is worth a reflection. Thomas Mathews, in his *The Clash of Gods*, adds an interesting twist to the issue. He believes that early Christians used images as projections of their perception

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<sup>22</sup> Bouyer, 43.

<sup>23</sup> Bouyer, 44; Cf. Maurizio Bergamo, et al., *Spazi Celebrativi: L'Architettura dell'Ecclesia*. 2nd ed. (Bologna, Italy: EDB, 2001), 223.

<sup>24</sup> For example, Luis Bouyer believed that the seat of the bishop, as the doctor of the apostolic tradition of the new covenant, was a development of the seat of Moses and only later it became a correlated to the politics of the Roman Empire. Cf. Bouyer, 32.

<sup>25</sup> "Las primitivas comunidades cristianas se complacieron contemplando a Cristo como único maestro y doctor y, como tal, lo representaron con frecuencia sentado en una catedra."

All translations from Spanish or Italian are my own unless otherwise stated.

Pedro Farnés Scherer, *Construir y adaptar las iglesias. Orientaciones doctrinales y sugerencias prácticas sobre el espacio celebrativo, según el espíritu del Concilio Vaticano II* (Barcelona, Spain: Regina, 1989), 76.

<sup>26</sup> An example is the mosaic in the apse of Saint Pudenziana in Rome or the one in the Basilica of Saint Paul outside the walls in Rome. Photos in the appendix.

of Christ: “once they ‘imagined’ Christ, he *became* what people pictured him to be.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, several art historians see the representations of Christ enthroned among his apostles as “a takeover of images of the emperor who was similarly presented in the imagery of his propaganda, enthrone among his councilors or senate.”<sup>28</sup> Yet, not all that glitters is gold. This theory, known as “Emperor Mystique”, does not take into account that in mosaics such as the one in Saint Pudenziana, Christ is depicted wearing civilian clothes, with no diadem on his head and no scepter on his hands.<sup>29</sup> Also, he is sitting on a large throne and not on the official seat of the emperor, the modest *sella regia*, allegedly used by king Romulus, founder of Rome.<sup>30</sup> In addition, Imperial etiquette would never allow the senate, nor anyone, to sit in the presence of the emperor.<sup>31</sup> Like Farnes, Mathew claims that “the throne of Christ in Saint Pudenziana is not intended to give Christ imperial status but divine status.”<sup>32</sup> Additionally, the mosaic was placed in the conch of the apse and became the object of attention in worship, inviting the faithful to join the company of the apostles gathered around Christ, now present in the person of the bishop.<sup>33</sup> A *cathedra* for the bishop was built directly beneath the mosaic in the apse, flanked by the clergy who sat on the semicircular bench around him, thus making flesh what was represented above them (fig. 3).<sup>34</sup> The bishop sitting on a throne is clearly linked to Christ as the head of the assembly: his authority derives directly from Christ, without the mediation of the emperor.<sup>35</sup> This is very important because it already sheds light on the *raison d'être* of the chair:

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<sup>27</sup> Thomas F. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods: A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 11.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Mathews, 101.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Ibid., 104-105.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Ibid., 109.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Ibid., 94-96; Another fine sample is Santa Sabina on the Aventine in Rome.

<sup>34</sup> Another example is the Church of San Vitale, in Ravenna (fig. 4).

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Mathews, 114

through the bishops, successors of the apostles, it is Christ himself who teaches and presides over the assembly.

In conclusion, is the chair of the priest celebrant a product of the imperial Church or a theological development of the bishop now acting *in persona Christi capitis*? Probably both. It is not difficult to imagine that when the Apostles founded churches and taught/presided over the liturgies, they would be given a seat, even just out of gratitude for the message they brought. It is also not difficult to imagine that, as they departed from the communities, somebody was left in charge and that seat, representing the role within the assembly, was passed on to them. With the move to the basilicas, the chair and the mission of the presiding minister became more prominent and, in some cases, mingled with politics and, perhaps even, personal vanity. Yet, early Christian art testifies to how the chair was mostly understood as the connection of the assembly to their bishop, to the apostles, to Christ.<sup>36</sup>

As time passed, the Church was not able to recover the original symbolic value of the chair. As Farnes explains, in the Middle Ages this symbol continued to be unseen: “just as during this era the meaning of the altar as table of the Lord was lost, having been reduced to its meaning as altar of sacrifice, so the symbolism of the chair was lost too.”<sup>37</sup> During that period, the only focus of the liturgical assembly was the altar, the *locus* of the sacrifice of Christ. Nevertheless, episcopal

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<sup>36</sup> Another important ancient mosaic is the one in the Arian Baptistery in Ravenna (fig. 3). An empty throne is presented between Peter and Paul on the east axis of the monument and its meaning confirm our thesis: “This throne seems to represent Christ's power, for Peter and Paul hold attributes that derive from Christ's authority - the keys and the word. By analogy, the crowns in the hands of the Apostles may equally depict gifts bestowed by God on his deserving disciples. As they receive their reward, so the neophyte receives his or her reward through baptism. Viewers are apparently engaged in identification with the figure of the Apostle rather than with his action, analogously to their identification with Christ rather than the action of baptism in the central image.” Annabel Jane Wharton, “Ritual and Reconstructed Meaning: The Neonian Baptistery in Ravenna,” in *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 69, No. 3 (Sep., 1987), pp. 358-375.

<https://sites.duke.edu/annabelwharton/files/2015/08/WhartonAB1987.pdf>

<sup>37</sup> “Del mismo modo que se perdió en esta época la significación del altar como mesa del Señor, quedando reducido su significado al aspecto del ara, así también se olvidó el simbolismo de la catedral.” Farnés, 77.

chairs were still preserved in the cathedrals for the bishops, but they lost their original meaning and placement. As David Stancliffe, a retired Church of England bishop, explains, the altar “displaced the throne of the bishop from the centre of the apse to the side of the sanctuary [...] A theology of tangible realities replaces a theology of relationships and grace.”<sup>38</sup> What emerges is the loss of spiritual authority of the bishops, who were often seen as lords or administrators of their diocese; they had become rulers and not pastors. Thus, the symbolism of Christ teaching the faithful gathered around his seat faded away. Also, Farnes confirms this liturgical and architectural development: “sitting on those regal thrones, the bishops attended - not celebrated - the liturgy being celebrated by their chaplains, just as the great of this world used to do.”<sup>39</sup> In addition, the accompanying presbyters were forbidden to occupy the throne that was reserved for the highest authority. It is evident that the throne of the bishop had gone a long way from the original presiding chair from where Christ and the apostles taught.

The presbyters, who by this time were already celebrating the whole Mass at the altar, even the Liturgy of the Word, were allowed to sit down during the short intervals only to rest (while the Gloria or Credo was being sung by the choir). They could only do so on small stools, placed in some ordinary place in the sanctuary.<sup>40</sup> As Steven Schloeder, an architect specializing in Catholic church design noted, this tradition has remained untouched for many centuries: “before the Second Vatican Council, only the bishop would have a special type of seat, and the lower clergy would sit on a movable bench called a *sedilla*, or a *sedile*.”<sup>41</sup> After the Council, a special seat was introduced for the priest celebrant, the presider’s chair. This seat stems from the *cathedra* and its theology

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<sup>38</sup> David Stancliffe, *The Lion Companion to Church Architecture* (Oxford, England: Lion Hudson plc, 2008), 86.

<sup>39</sup> “Eran más bien muebles principescos desde donde los obispos asistían – no celebraban – a la liturgia celebrada por sus capellanes, a la manera como lo hacían los grandes de este mundo.” Farnés, 78.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Farnés, 78.

<sup>41</sup> Schloeder, 88.



must also be understood in light of the bishop's chair. The chair of the priest celebrant is a sign that ought to speak clearly of the connection between the priest presider, the bishop of the diocese, and Christ.

### 1.3 THE CHAIR IN THE OFFICIAL CHURCH DOCUMENTS

In Saint Peter's Basilica, the chair of St. Peter, the first Bishop of Rome, is preserved in the *Triumph of the cathedra Petri* (fig. 6) designed by Gian Lorenzo Bernini. Since the fourth century, the Church has honored this chair with a special feast on February 22<sup>nd</sup>. Clearly, St. Peter's chair was never understood as the throne of a king or of a tyrant. As Pope Benedict XVI said in a homily, "the chair expresses the permanent presence of the Apostle in the Magisterium of his successors. Saint Peter's chair, we could say, is the throne of truth which takes its origin from Christ's commission after the confession at Caesarea Philippi."<sup>42</sup>

The Catholic Church has several documents concerning the chair of the priest celebrant: *The General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, *Built of Living Stones*, and the "Order for Blessings on the Occasion of the Installation of a New Episcopal or Presidential Chair" in the *Book of Blessings*.

Admittedly, these documents do not dwell much on the theological meaning of the priest celebrant's chair, and, as is often the case, are telegraphic in their instruction. Nevertheless, from the documents, it follows that the environment for the Eucharistic celebration must be arranged

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<sup>42</sup> Benedict XVI, *Homily On the Occasion of the Ordinary Public Consistory for the Creation of new Cardinals and for the vote on several causes of Canonization*, (19 February 2012), at Vatican Basilica. Accessed November 30, 2021.

[https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2012/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_hom\\_20120219\\_nuovi-cardinali.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2012/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20120219_nuovi-cardinali.html)

to help the assembly understand and participate in what is being celebrated. A church is a living ecclesiology that shapes the worship of a community and its faith.

The chair of the priest celebrant is one of three liturgical focuses of the Christian assembly together with the altar and the ambo: “in 1962 Charles Davis urged a keener sense of the link between word and sacrament, reflected in the correlation of ambo and altar, and he maintained that the seat of the priest should take its place as ‘the third essential feature of any balanced sanctuary.’”<sup>43</sup> The Word of God must be proclaimed from its own place of proclamation – the ambo or table of the Word. The altar must be at the center of the assembly – the table of the banquet and sacrifice. The chair of the priest celebrant must be visible not only for its functional purpose, but also for its theological-liturgical significance in reference to Christ: the presiding minister is the visible sign of Christ as Head of the Assembly. Thus, as Mark Boyer explains in his *The Liturgical Environment*, “the chair represents his dignity as one who leads in the person of Christ.”<sup>44</sup>

Clearly, the official documents of the Church see the chair not only as a practical object to sit on, but rather as a symbol. In fact, the chair of the presider is derived from the bishop’s *cathedra*, a symbol of his teaching and pastoral duty. The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* affirms that “the chair of the Priest Celebrant must signify his function of presiding over the gathering and of directing the prayer.”<sup>45</sup> Again, it is not just a place for the celebrant to rest. Rather, it speaks to the assembly, saying that the person sitting or standing by the chair has been given the authority and the mission to preside by Christ and in Christ. That’s why some elements

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. Richard Kieckhefer, *Theology in Stone Church Architecture From Byzantium to Berkeley* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2008), 93.

<sup>44</sup> Mark Boyer, *The Liturgical Environment: What the Documents Say* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015), 78.

<sup>45</sup> Catholic Church, *The General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), § 310. Accessed November 30, 2021.

<https://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/the-mass/general-instruction-of-the-roman-missal>.

of the liturgy ought to be performed from the chair. For example, it is clearly not the same to proclaim the Word of God while holding the Lectionary in one's hands rather than the ambo. The same applies to the chair: some parts of the Mass are properly said from the chair, the place from where the priest celebrant leads the assembly in the name of Christ. It is from the chair that the priest celebrant begins and ends the Eucharistic Liturgy; from the chair he leads the Penitential Act and the Glory, and that he collects all the prayers and intentions of the assembly in the Opening Prayer. After he listens to the Word of God with the Assembly, the chair is again the place from where invites them to answer to what was proclaimed with the Creed and the General Intercessions. Finally, it is from the chair that he pronounces the prayer after communion and sends the assembly in mission at the end of Mass. To disregard this aspect is to disregard the nature of the celebration. The priest celebrant presides through the authority and as an extension of the bishop, the shepherd of his diocese. Thus, it is the Ordinary's duty to bless the presidential chair of a parish as "a sign of the parish's connection to the bishop through his pastor."<sup>46</sup>

The blessing of the chair of the priest celebrant is very significant because it expresses the theology of the chair and its connection with the *munus regendi*. It is not a very common rite, and it is often skipped, yet the *General Instructions of the Roman Missal* affirms that "it is appropriate that before being put into liturgical use, the chair be blessed according to the rite described in the Roman Ritual."<sup>47</sup>

There are two prayers of blessing found in the ritual, one within Mass and one within the celebration of the Word of God. The first is addressed to Christ and describes the presider as a

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<sup>46</sup> Boyer, 80.

<sup>47</sup> *The General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, § 310.

shepherd of the flock and, like the Good Shepherd who gathers scattered sheep, acting *in persona Christi capitis*, gathers, leads, and feeds the community of believers:

Lord Jesus, with one voice we praise your holy name and raise our hearts to you in prayer. You are the Good Shepherd who came to gather your scattered sheep into one fold. Through those you have chosen as ministers of your truth, feed your faithful; through your chosen shepherds, lead them. Then one day gather both shepherds and flock into the joyous green pastures of eternity, where you live and reign forever and ever.<sup>48</sup>

When the blessing is done within the celebration of the Word of God, the words of the blessing focus on the pastors who have been sent to serve and not to be served.<sup>49</sup> The prayer asks that those who preside may always proclaim the Word, celebrate the sacraments, and together with the assembly, praise God:

Lord Jesus Christ, you taught the pastors of the Church not to want to be served by others, but to serve. Grant that those who preside from this chair will proclaim your word ardently and celebrate your sacraments rightly, so that, with the people entrusted to their care, they may come before the seat of your majesty, there to praise you without ceasing, for you live and reign forever and ever.<sup>50</sup>

Surprisingly enough, these prayers do not appear in the new *The Order of the Dedication of a Church and an Altar*, not even in the appendix. Perhaps the reason is that they are not for the exclusive use of bishops. Yet, the instructions in the *Book of Blessings* claim that “when a church is dedicated or blessed, all the appointments that are already in place are considered to be blessed along with the church.”<sup>51</sup> The explanatory nature of the prayer is lost in this way and with it the opportunity to teach the meaning of this symbol.

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<sup>48</sup> “Order for a Blessing on the occasion of the Installation of a new Episcopal or Presidential Chair, a new Lectern, a new Tabernacle, or a new Confessional,” in *Book of Blessings* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1989), § 1159; Cf. Boyer, 80.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Schloeder, 88.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. “Order for a Blessing on the occasion of the Installation of a new Episcopal or Presidential Chair, a new Lectern, a new Tabernacle, or a new Confessional,” § 1170.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* § 1150.

In addition, *the General Instruction to the Roman Missal* describes standing at the chair as the first choice of place for the priest celebrant to give the homily. As Boyer explains, “giving the homily at the chair emphasizes the priest’s status as teacher, leader, and sanctifier of the community. It also focuses on the fact that he represents the bishop in the parish, where the priest functions as shepherd of the flock.”<sup>52</sup> Yet, if from the chair the shepherd leads the flock, perhaps there is another place, within the liturgical space, from where he can teach the faith. Today, not many priests preach from the chair, as the ambo seems to offer more protection from possible rotten tomatoes! Yet, it is not just about protection! As we will see in the following chapter, I believe that the preferred place for the homily is the ambo, the place from where the *munus docendi* is exercised.

*Sacrosanctum Concilium* affirms that one of the four modes of Christ’s presence in the liturgy is in the person of the minister.<sup>53</sup> This should suffice to understand that the chair of the priest celebrant cannot be eliminated or reduced to a simple chair of one of the faithful or of one of the concelebrating ordained ministers. If the presider truly acts *in persona Christi capitis*, the presidential chair must clearly and symbolically appear as the place from which Christ presides over his assembly, shepherds her, prays for her and with her, and makes present the salvation He won for us. Thus, *Built of Living Stones* explains how “the chair reflects the dignity of the one who leads the community in the person of Christ.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Boyer, 86.

<sup>53</sup> Vatican Council II, Constitution on the Divine Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (4 December 1963) § 7, at The Holy See. Accessed November 30, 2021.

[https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19631204\\_sacrosanctum-concilium\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html)

<sup>54</sup> *Built of Living Stones*, § 63.

## 1.4 THE CHAIR AND THE *MUNUS REGENDI*

As we have seen, the chair of the priest celebrant is the preferred place whence the assembly is led in worship and instructed in faith. This is exactly what the *munus regendi*, or kingly office, calls for. Unfortunately, the word “king” today has lost its meaning as someone who inherits power or position by right of birth, and it has connotations of tyrant, despot, and dictator. For the most part, kings exist in legends and are seen as part of a past that is not compatible with our democratic society. Kings, because of their hereditary position and their lifelong rule, at times became capricious and petty, and were known mostly for their extravagances rather than for their service to the people they were called to serve. This, however, is not the way in which ordained ministers are called to live their dignity and kingly *munus*. An influential Orthodox priest and theologian, Alexander Schmemmann, declares that “the first and essential connotation of the idea of kingship is that of *power* and *authority* – but of power and authority bestowed from *above*, given by God and manifesting His power.”<sup>55</sup> A better word to understand this office is *shepherd*. This image is of one who cares and protects the flock. The image of the shepherd pervades the Old Testament. For example, the Lord tells King David “You will shepherd my people Israel, and you will become their ruler” (2 Sam 7:7). A king is a shepherd who dedicates his life to the wellbeing of the people entrusted to his care: he is vigilant over danger, courageous in battle and patient in service to his flock. Notably, important frescos found in the catacombs of Priscilla, St. Callisto, and Domitilla in Rome, represent Christ as the Good Shepherd (fig. 7).

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<sup>55</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *Of Water and the Spirit: A Liturgical Study of Baptism* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1974), 81-82.

This short explanation sheds light on the kingly office of the ordained ministers. As Cardinal Dulles points out, “bishops have undertaken, together with their assistants, the presbyters and deacons, the service of the community, presiding in place of God over the flock, whose shepherds they are, as teachers of doctrine, priests of sacred worship, and ministers of government.”<sup>56</sup> To exercise the kingly *munus* means to imitate Christ, the Good Shepherd, who cares for the flock, seeks the lost sheep, and even lays down his life for their salvation. Not by chance since the days of St. Pope Paul VI, the Fourth Sunday of Easter, also known as Good Shepherd Sunday is also the World Day of Prayer for Vocations. Pope Francis, at the Chrism Mass in 2013, soon after his election, invited all priests to be “shepherds with ‘the smell of the sheep.’”<sup>57</sup> Therefore, an ordained minister who wears an aroma of superiority over the laity is like a confused shepherd who scatters more than he gathers the sheep, while he himself is estranged from the sheep.

How do bishops and priests exercise this *munus*? Within the community, the ordained ministers must be agents of “growth and unity, objectives to be achieved through preaching, liturgical worship, and pastoral governance.”<sup>58</sup> In a General Audience, Pope Benedict XVI reminded bishops and priests that they participate in Christ’s mission “of taking care of God’s People, of educating them in the faith and of guiding, inspiring and sustaining the Christian Community.”<sup>59</sup> As shepherds, bishops and priests need to make sure that the flock is safe and sound, protected from wolves and thieves. This is accomplished first through prayer, but also by leading the assembly in worship, in preaching, admonishing, and guiding the flock on the right

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<sup>56</sup> Avery Dulles, *The Priestly Office: A Theological Reflection* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 46.

<sup>57</sup> Robin Gomes, “Pope to priests: Be shepherds with the smell of the sheep” (June 7, 2021). In *Vatican News*. Accessed on May 7, 2022.  
<https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2021-06/pope-francis-priests-students-church-louis-french.html>.

<sup>58</sup> Dulles, 49.

<sup>59</sup> Benedict XVI, General Audience on *Munus Regendi* (26 May 2010), at The Holy See.  
[https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2010/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_aud\\_20100526.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20100526.html)

path. All of this is normally done from the *cathedra*, or the chair of the priest celebrant, to underline the authority bestowed by reason of the service. Pope Benedict insists that a fruitful *munus regendi* for the ordained ministers depends on the awareness of the identity received in priestly ordination and requires docility toward Christ's governance of the sacerdotal life, which will lead to the docility of Christ's flock toward their shepherds.<sup>60</sup>

Yet, the laity also exercises the *munus regendi*. This is evident especially in the spouses, ministers of the domestic church, as they are called to govern and apply the wisdom of the Catholic Church in their family (fig. 8). As seen in the introduction to this chapter, it is at the dining room table that this role is more evident. Parents are to teach and lead the children in prayer, spark and monitor their conversation, and guide them in their lives. In addition, parents teach the children to appreciate the importance of the domestic liturgy by wearing proper festive clothing, by behaving in a respectful manner at the table, but also by "imposing" a certain order in the house governing all aspects of family life, from rising to a time of bedtime, a curfew for teenagers, a dress code that promotes chaste living and guards decorum in the relationship between boys and girls in the family.

If it is not always easy to respect the rules in the family, it is not easier for parents to lay them down with love and firmness. Yet, these are essential to the integrity and respect in the family. Nowadays, also due to widespread divorce, young people are often left to their own devices and left without much supervision and guidance, growing without much formation or structure. The current generation, as it is well known, is raised more by the internet and technology than by live interaction with parents. The gap between the baby boomers (born between 1945 -1965) and the Gen Alpha (born between 2010 and the present day) is abysmal.

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<sup>60</sup> Cf. Ibid.



This is evident by considering how much technology has evolved. Yet, technology is not the only “plague” that attacks the family and the authority of parents in the shepherding role: contraception, abortion, divorce, unions between persons of the same sex, cohabitation... All these things, wholly unthinkable less than 100 years ago, are a daily reality in today’s society.

The spouses must find the strength to fulfill their mission as ministers despite all these adversities. Participating in Sunday liturgies as a family can empower spouses to shepherd their families despite all difficulties. In fact, respecting and giving authority to the bishop or the priest celebrant, not because of their talents or charism, but because of their office, helps the whole family to see that there is an order and a plan of God for the family. The secret to this *munus*, shared also by the ordained ministers, is love. When the children, or the parishioners, feel loved by the ministers, then everything is possible. Decisions that are guided by the good of the persons, irrespective of the price or in spite of the sacrifices made, always build up the family and the church. If this principle is kept in place, then both the spouses and the ordained ministers will be able to give up their lives for the sake of the Kingdom of God. How then should the chair of the priest celebrant look or where should it be placed in order to foster order and unity?

## **1.5 PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

*Sacrosanctum Concilium* confirms that holy Mother Church, through the reform of the Sacred Liturgy brought about by the Second Vatican Council, desires that the liturgical signs, as well as the texts and rites, “express more clearly the holy things which they signify; the Christian people, so far as possible, should be enabled to understand them with ease and to take part in them fully, actively, and as befits a community.”<sup>61</sup> Thus, following Farnes’ chapter “An object whose

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<sup>61</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, § 21.

symbolism makes practical demands”,<sup>62</sup> it is possible to identify some indications that may aid a pastor and its people to implement what was sought after.

### **1.5.1 There must be only one chair for the priest celebrant.<sup>63</sup>**

As we have seen, the chair is a symbol of Christ presiding over the assembly in the person of the priest celebrant. Thus, the chair of the presider must be different from the chairs of the concelebrants, ministers, and faithful. If the chair of the presider is like the others, then the symbol is simply lost. Understandably, there must be other chairs in the sanctuary due to the variety of ministers who help and participate in the celebration, but “it must be very clear to everybody that the presidential chair is unique in its kind.”<sup>64</sup> If there are concelebrating presbyters, their chairs must be different and simpler than the one of the presider and, possibly, should be placed on a lower level, at the sides of the priest celebrant’s chair. The reason is not that they are less important than the main celebrant, but that the Eucharist is fundamentally “the action of Christ joined in by the whole assembly, both co-consecrators and the rest of the faithful”<sup>65</sup> (who, by the way, are also concelebrants).

### **1.5.2 The priest celebrant’s chair must be elevated.<sup>66</sup>**

This indication underlines the importance that the presiding priest may be easily seen by all the members of the assembly gathered for the sacred action. Obviously, each church must find what works in the sacred space. Nevertheless, what it is recommended is that the priest celebrant may truly preside over the assembly. If his chair is neither visible nor particular, then this would hardly be the case.

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<sup>62</sup> “Exigencias practicas del simbolismo de la sede.” Farnés, 82.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. *Built of Living Stones*, § 63; Cf. *The General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, § 310.

<sup>64</sup> “Ha de quedar bien claro que la silla presidencial es única en su género.” Farnés, 83.

<sup>65</sup> “Es la acción de Cristo a quien se une toda la asamblea, concelebrantes y resto de los fieles.” Farnés, 84.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. *Built of Living Stones*, § 63; Cf. *The General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, § 310.

### **1.5.3 The presidential chair must not be too far from the assembly.<sup>67</sup>**

According to Bouyer, in the early synagogue the seat of Moses was placed in the center of the assembly.<sup>68</sup> Although, as we have seen, this does not seem the case, it is not implausible to think that a place of honor was given to the rabbi leading the service and that its location was at the center of the assembly. The main reason for this was practical. In a time when microphones did not exist, the closer to the speaker, the better. For the same reason, very often, the bema or platform with the lectern, was placed in the middle of the synagogue: so that everybody could hear. So, even though initially the *cathedra* could have been placed in the midst of the assembly, as bishops acquired a new status thanks to Constantine's peace, they took a prominent position in the apse far away from the people, according to the use of the Roman magistrates.<sup>69</sup>

Clearly, when the documents require the chair not to be too far from the assembly, they have this in mind. The priest celebrant is the head of the assembly, and the head should not be separated nor distant from the body. For the same reason, communion rails or other physical separations between the nave and the apse should not exist. Anything that separates physically, separates even more psychologically. What the Church aims to achieve is differentiation, not separation.

### **1.5.4 The location of the chair.**

A final point that must be mentioned is on the location of the chair within the church. The documents suggest that "the best place for the chair is in a position facing the people at the head of the sanctuary; unless the design of the building or other circumstances impede this: for example, if the great distance would interfere with communication between the priest and the gathered

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<sup>67</sup> Cf. Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Bouyer, 11.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Maurizio Bergamo, 221.

assembly, or if the tabernacle is in the center behind the altar.”<sup>70</sup> There are several reasons for placing the chair in the apse: “it is the terminal point of the processional path, the gathering space for the axiality of the liturgical fires, the closing of the centripetal hemicycle of the assembly, the pole of the eschatological tension of the entire body of the Ecclesia and its opening towards heaven.”<sup>71</sup>

Nevertheless, since liturgical spaces differ greatly from one church to another, the directive is not mandatory. There needs to be careful planning on this matter, “for the need is to bring out, at one and the same time, several things: the fact that these ministers belong entirely to the single assembly; their presidential service of this assembly; their presence around the ambo like the rest of the assembly; and their procession to the altar, unlike the rest of the assembly.”<sup>72</sup> Below we will discuss with more detail the disadvantages of such a placement. It suffices to say that this issue has not been consistently resolved even 60 years after the Council.

To sum up, the documents explain that the chair of the priest celebrant should be unique, raised, and not too distant from the people; its location varies according to the sacred space. Although these may seem simple details, the texts give us the instructions through which the sign of the priest celebrant’s chair may express more clearly the holy thing which it signifies: Christ is present at the celebration in the person of the main celebrant.

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<sup>70</sup> *The General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, § 310; Cf. *Built of Living Stones*, § 64; Cf. Boyer, 84.

<sup>71</sup> “Punto terminale del percorso processionale, spazio di raccolta dell'assialità dei fuochi liturgici, chiusura dell'emicyclo centripeto dell'assemblea, polo della tensione escatologica dell'intero corpo dell'Ecclesia e sua apertura verso il cielo.” Bergamo, 225.

<sup>72</sup> Crispino Valenziano, “Liturgical Architecture.” In *Handbook For Liturgical Studies, Volume V*, ed. Anscar J. Chupungco, OSB (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 287.

## 1.6 CRITICISM AND NEGATIVE UNDERSTATING

Having surveyed the rich theological symbolism of the presider's chair and its practical considerations, now we turn to the negative criticism toward a separate chair for the main celebrant. Through the Second Vatican Council the Catholic Church wants to promote "active participation" within the assembly, which should not be a passive spectator of what the clergy does at Mass but should truly be immersed in the mystery celebrated. Yet, doesn't the institution of the priest celebrant chair work against active participation? Doesn't it underline the difference in hierarchy between clergy and laity, thus separating the two? What should be the location of such a chair? At the apse, as the liturgical norms suggest, or among the assembly, as, for example, in Rudolf Schwarz's *open ring* (fig. 9)?<sup>73</sup>

There is no easy solution. Richard Kieckhefer, a religious historian and a scholar of church architecture, lays out the difficulties: "one might distinguish a clericalism of distance and a clericalism of proximity: one in which the clergy are detached in isolation from the laity and one in which they are exalted in a special role immediately before the congregation."<sup>74</sup> As he explains any form of church design can lead to a sense that it is the clergy who act and the laity who merely react, or that the clergy are active and the laity passive:

"Processional space can create this effect if it is the clergy alone or chiefly who are perceived as processing. Auditorium space can do so by calling clear attention to the preacher who proclaims the gospel to the congregation and by making that one person the center of attention. In a church segmented for intercessory worship, it is the clergy who do the work of interceding on behalf of the congregation. In a church segmented for mediatory liturgy, it is the clergy and their attendants who mediate between one sacred space and another."<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Cf. Bert Daelemans, *Spiritus Loci: A Theological Method for Contemporary Church Architecture*, Studies in religion and the arts volume 9 (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2015), 285.

<sup>74</sup> Kieckhefer, 282.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

Richard S. Vosko, a diocesan priest and a liturgical design consultant, brings up this point in his *Art and Architecture for Congregational Worship*. According to him, “nothing in the building, veiled or visible, should suggest that some people are more blessed or more important than others in the same space.”<sup>76</sup> He views very favorably clergy that sit with the congregation to listen to the Word of God and who approach the altar or the ambo when they need to.<sup>77</sup> His ideal of a church space is one that “does not divide the congregation during worship with distinct areas for clergy and laity.”<sup>78</sup> Thus, it appears that he would eliminate the sanctuary altogether in favor of a more inclusive shape such as the circle. Nevertheless, although his contribution is truly noble and meaningful, he dismisses the importance of the priest celebrant as the presider of the liturgical action *in persona Christi capitis* and exercising his *munus regendi*. Also, I think it’s very important to underline the fact that, as mentioned above, before the Council the priest was mostly standing, fulfilling his liturgical functions. With the reform of the Second Vatican Council, the priest sits, like the rest of the assembly, to listen to the Word of God. By this meaningful change, the Council implied that the Word proclaimed is directed to the laity as well as to the presbyters.

Farnes, speaking about the ambiguous symbolism of the chair, admits that it cannot be denied that placing the bishop or the presbyter in an outstanding chair has the risk both for him and for the assembly, who looks at him, of turning him into a prominent person, superior in relation to the others.<sup>79</sup> Farnes’ analysis reflects Vosko’s criticism. It is clear that this issue is truly a danger for a Church that wants to promote *active participation* and equality among its

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<sup>76</sup> Vosko, 34.

<sup>77</sup> Cf. Vosko, 57.

<sup>78</sup> Vosko, 78.

<sup>79</sup> Cf. Farnés, 80.

members. Undeniably, this concern is very much present nowadays when people are particularly sensitive to privilege and unjust inequalities. Just the fact that there is a separate chair for somebody in the congregation may spark controversy. Yet, the truth is that the only solution to this dilemma is a deeper understanding of the symbolic and theological meaning of the chair of the priest celebrant for both clergy and laity: “the presidential chair must always be considered like a sacrament, as the place prepared for the Lord, never as the chair of honor reserved for the minister.”<sup>80</sup>

The criticism about the separation between clergy and laity is a slippery slope. All people are equal in the eyes of God yet each one has a different role in his family and in society: spouses have a different role than their children; governors have a different role than engineers. If this basic principle is discarded, Pandora’s box is opened. As Farnes explains, “the Church, while it is true that it is served by *different* ministers, is not divided into unequal categories. The only one who has in Himself a higher category is Christ, the Lord and Head of the Church. His presence is the only one that must stand out above the assembly.”<sup>81</sup> The bishop and the priest celebrant have a precise role within the assembly, just as parents have a precise role within the family.

It must never be forgotten that, in the Catholic Church, a person becomes more of a servant with every step taken. Lectors and extraordinary ministers of Holy Community serve the community and because of this public service, they are called to be living examples of holiness within the parish. Their role is not a privilege but a ministry, just as the priest celebrant is a servant of God and of the assembly. This notion is even clearer when meditating upon the

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<sup>80</sup> “La sede presidencial ha de ser siempre considerada como un sacramento, como el lugar preparado para el Señor, y nunca como la silla de honor reservada para el ministro.” Farnés, 81.

<sup>81</sup> “Y la Iglesia, si bien esta servida por diversos ministerios, no esta dividida en diversas categorías. El único que tiene una categoría superior en si mismo es Cristo, el Señor y cabeza de la Iglesia, cuya presencia es la única que debe destacarse por encima de la asamblea.” Farnés, 83.

hierarchy of the Church and one of the titles of the Supreme Pontiff: servant of the servants of God. Thus, the liturgical assembly must be organized in a way that reflects the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council: the body of Christ formed by a community of missionary disciples (both ordained and laity) sent to announce the Good News by virtue of their Baptism.

In recent years, Pope Francis spoke often about the danger of division between clergy and laity by denouncing a great evil lurking at the door of every Christian: clericalism. The Holy Father, in a homily at Santa Marta, said that “there is that spirit of clericalism in the Church, that we feel: clerics feel superior; clerics distance themselves from the people. Clerics always say: ‘this should be done like this, like this, like this, and you – go away!’”<sup>82</sup> It is true. There may be some clergy that feel superior and use the structure of the church to feed their ego and importance. Many times, clericalism is evident by the way a church is arranged. As we already mentioned, a church is a living ecclesiology. Yet, one size does not fit all. Many clergy do not fall into this trap and truly dedicate their lives to serve the common priesthood of the faithful, both in life and in liturgy, guiding and caring for the community following the example of the Good Shepherd. Also, I would argue that clericalism is not just an issue of the clergy but also of many lay people who see the priests as intermediaries between them and God, while “there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 2:5; cf. Hebrews 9:15).

Finally, although a separate seat for the priest celebrant may be interpreted as an ostentation of clerical power, in the eyes of the Church, it’s just the opposite. Christ came to serve, not to be served (Matthew 20:28) and, by presiding over the liturgical assembly, He

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<sup>82</sup> Francis, *Morning Meditation: People Discarded* (13 December 2016) at Casa Santa Marta. Accessed November 30, 2021.

[https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/cotidie/2016/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie\\_20161213\\_people-discarded.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/cotidie/2016/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie_20161213_people-discarded.html)



fulfills His servant role through the ordained minister and empowers the spouses to serve their families in the same way.

## 1.7 CONCLUSION

My father's seat at the dinner table signified his authority and his mission as the head and shepherd of my family. Nobody ever dared to question his role because it was a given. The same can be said regarding the bishop's *cathedra*. I don't think that many people have ever questioned the fact that the bishop has a special seat and that he is the shepherd of the diocese. On the other hand, it seems that the chair of the priest celebrant has undergone great criticism, and, to this day, its very existence is put into question.

In this chapter, I have briefly surveyed the history of the chair, its theological meaning, its connection to the kingly office, its practical considerations, and its criticism. Overall, I believe that it's fair to say that most of what has been said is not known to the average Joe. I would even go further. As I was working on this chapter, I discussed the matter with several of my brother priests and most of them had a very superficial knowledge of the history and theology of the chair of the priest celebrant, nor of the fact, the *munus regendi* is most notably exercised from the *cathedra*, as a service to the people of God. I believe that this is the issue with those who are critical of the chair of the priest celebrant. As I wrote in the introduction, we cannot love what we do not know.

The chair of the priest celebrant is not meant as an honorific and hierarchical insignia of times past. It is not a symbol of superiority or lordship over the assembly. The chair is a symbol of the link between the parish community and the bishop, and through the bishop, to Christ. Through it the ordained ministers exercise the *munus regendi* enabling spouses to do likewise in

their families. In fact, it is from the presider's chair that the assembly is served by Christ who leads, prays, and addresses the community of the faithful. The chair is the symbol of the *munus regendi*, both for the ordained ministers and for the Christian spouses, called to fulfill their mission as shepherds with love and fidelity to the truth.

## 1.8 APPENDIX – FIGURES



Figure 1. Throne at Saint John the Lateran, Rome. Photo by Carlos Jiménez Ruiz.



Figure 2. Christ enthroned among the Apostles, apse mosaic in Saint Pudenziana. Photo by TTaylor.



Figure 3. Reconstruction sketch showing bishop's cathedra beneath the mosaic, Saint Pudenziana, Rome. *The Clash of Gods*, 93.



Figure 4. The empty throne, Ss. Peter and Paul; particular of the dome in the Arian Baptistery in Ravenna. Photos by Nicola de Grandi.



Figure 5. Presiding chair, Saint Vitale, Ravenna. Photo by Nicola de Grandi.





Figure 6. Triumph of the Cathedra Petri, Photo by By Dnlor 01.



Figure 7. Christ as the Good Shepherd. Catacombs of St. Callisto, Priscilla, and Domitilla in Rome. Photos by DeAgostini.



Figure 8. Domestic church at prayer led by the spouses. Photo by Maria Filippucci.



Figure 9. Schwarz's Open Ring rendered at the church of Saint Francois de Molitor, Paris, France. Ordained ministers sit with the assembly. Photo by Abaca Press.

## **2.0 CHAPTER 2 - THE AMBO AS THE SYMBOL OF THE *MUNUS DOCENDI***

### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

My parents have been involved in the Neocatechumenal Way since before my birth. They left their home city of Rome and were sent to Umbria to offer the Way to the Bishops and priests of that Region. As long as I remember, they did not have what was considered a normal job: they were missionaries. As a consequence, the God of Jesus Christ was very much present in our household. We would pray together every day and talk about the events of the day with God's will always in mind. Furthermore, almost every evening my parents would leave us with babysitters because of their commitment as catechists in several parishes. Although as a child I did not understand why they gave priority to strangers rather than to their own children, my parents gave their lives to announce the Good News. I vividly remember the joy in my father's eyes when someone's life would change for the better thanks to the work they were doing. To me, there was not a better job in the world and if today I am a priest, it is clearly because of their witness as Christians.

As I mentioned above, my father died in 1997. I was only 10 and I couldn't understand why this happened. After all, they worked for God! If God existed, He would never allow something like that to happen: my father was only 45, my mother was pregnant with the eleventh child, and they were praying when he just suddenly died. Nevertheless, I still carry in my heart what my mother did on that day. She called all of us, one by one, and she opened a reading at random from the Bible. She knew that there were no human words that would console us or comfort us. Even in utter suffering, she clung to the Word of God and announced His love.

Honestly, I have no recollection of what Word I received that day. But I will always remember that I received one. Today, as I am grateful to my mother for everything I have

received, I am also grateful to God for the Second Vatican Council and, in this case, for the liturgical renewal that brought back the Word of God to the center of our liturgies and our homes. As the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum* says, “in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them; and the force and power in the word of God is so great that it stands as the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons, the food of the soul, the pure and everlasting source of spiritual life.”<sup>83</sup>

The Council fathers did not limit themselves to a renewed theological approach to Sacred Scripture but also made practical provisions for it to be liturgically implemented. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* called for greater prominence of the Word of God because of its “greatest importance in the celebration of the liturgy.”<sup>84</sup> Thus, the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* decreed that every church must have an ambo, “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.”<sup>85</sup>

Clearly, the ambo is not just a piece of furniture but a *place* and a symbol. What does the ambo represent? Does its composition and location within a liturgical space facilitate or hinder active participation? How does the *munus docendi* enlighten its role? When should it be used? These are a few of the many questions that this chapter wishes to address.

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<sup>83</sup> Vatican Council II, Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum* (18 November 1965) § 21, at The Holy See. Accessed November 30, 2021.

[https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651118\\_dei-verbum\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html)

<sup>84</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, § 24.

<sup>85</sup> *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, § 309.

## 2.2 THE AMBO THROUGHOUT HISTORY

It is an almost impossible task to ascertain if and how the early Church used an ambo in its liturgies. If it was used, it would have probably been made of wood, and its evidence has not reached our times. As we have seen above, Bouyer claims that “the Church has its immediate preparation in the Jewish synagogue.”<sup>86</sup> If this was not the case for the chair of priest celebrant, it seems that it may be the case for the ambo. The word *ambon* (ἄμβων) means a rim or raised area: “a raised platform called a *migdal*, frequently translated as “pulpit” in scripture, is mentioned in the Book of Nehemiah (8:4), and Solomon is recorded as having constructed a bronze platform upon which he stood at the consecration of the Temple (2 Chron 13).”<sup>87</sup> Thus, the synagogues of the time of Jesus used a raised platform called *bema* placed at the center of the hall so that the assembly could hear what was proclaimed.<sup>88</sup> Frédéric Debuyst, a historian of the Liturgical Movement, agrees with Bouyer and affirms that following the example of Jesus, his apostles went to synagogues to announce the Good News and replicated the synagogal structures in the houses and in the church-houses, where Christians would meet.<sup>89</sup>

Other theologians do not agree with this position. For example, Benedikt Kranemann, a German professor of liturgical studies, believes that at the beginning there was no ambo at all. It is only in the fourth and fifth centuries, after the Edict of Milan, that raised platforms called ambos were introduced in churches, either at the center of the nave or on a side. This special

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<sup>86</sup> Bouyer, 9.

<sup>87</sup> Denis R. McNamara, “The Ambo: Launch Platform for the Word” (Nov. 15, 2016). In *Adoremus Bulletin*. Accessed November 7, 2022.  
<https://adoremus.org/2016/11/ambo-launch-platform-word/>

<sup>88</sup> Cf. Bouyer 16; Cf. Farnes 105.

<sup>89</sup> Cf. Frédéric Debuyst, “L’ambone: un luogo vivo per l’assemblea.” In *L’ambone*, ed. Goffredo Boselli (Magnano, Italy: Qiqajon, 2020), 19-20.



place was only used for the proclamation of Scripture and not for the homily, which was ordinarily given by the bishop from his *cathedra*.<sup>90</sup>

Notwithstanding its Jewish roots, the earliest written record of the ambo comes from Canon 15 of the Council of Laodicea (c. 363): “No others shall sing in the Church, save only the canonical singers, who go up into the ambo and sing from a book.”<sup>91</sup> It appears that by this time the ambo was a common feature in Christian liturgical spaces that had to adapt to the basilicas, such as St. John the Lateran, the oldest in the city of Rome. Large spaces required a raised location for the proclamation of the Word, yet “the bema itself could not any longer exist as a platform, which would have now made difficult the Eucharistic procession from the episcopal throne to the altar. It was replaced by an oblong enclosure on the ground floor, opened at both ends, where the ministers of the lower ranks, readers or singers, stood together: the *schola*. One or two permanent ambos or pulpits, on both sides, were added to it for readings.”<sup>92</sup> An example of this arrangement is found in the Basilica of San Clemente, in Rome, rebuilt by Cardinal Anastasius, ca 1099-ca. 1120 (fig. 1).<sup>93</sup> The liturgical space has been preserved from the original church and it includes the *Schola Cantorum* with two ambos on each side, one for the Gospel and one for the Epistle.<sup>94</sup> Another notable example of the centrality given to the Word of God is the original ambo in the cathedral of Hagia Sophia, built in 537 (fig. 2). Although these arrangements may have not been the norm for all churches, they underline the prominence given to the Word of God.

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<sup>90</sup> Cf. Benedikt Kranemann, “Parola, libro e luogo della proclamazione: Estetica della proclamazione della Parola.” In *L’ambone*, ed. Goffredo Boselli (Magnano, Italy: Qiqajon, 2020), 251; Cf. Schloeder, 89.

<sup>91</sup> “Synod of Laodicea.” In *New Advent Online*. Accessed on January 12, 2023.  
<https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3806.htm>

<sup>92</sup> Bouyer, 46; Cf. Valenziano, “Liturgical Architecture,” 385.

<sup>93</sup> A similar arrangement is found in Santa Maria in Cosmedin, Rome.

<sup>94</sup> Cf. Dino Marcantonio, “The Iconography of San Clemente in New Liturgical Movement” (March 30, 2011). In *New Liturgical Movement, Sacred Liturgy & Liturgical Art*. Accessed November 17, 2022.  
<https://www.newliturgicalmovement.org/2011/03/iconography-of-san-clemente.html#.Y1wlfnbMKUk>

Little by little, the prominence of the ambo within the liturgical assembly began to fade and, at the beginning of the twelfth century, the readings were proclaimed from a simpler lectern or directly from the altar.<sup>95</sup> Farnes claims that until people were convinced that all the Scripture was truly the Word of God, churches had a high, monumental ambo to proclaim it. Yet, as Latin fell in disuse and most people were not able to understand the proclamation, the Word of God lost importance, and this is evident from the architectural and liturgical practice.<sup>96</sup> Consequently, as Crispino Valenziano, one of the world's leading experts in sacred art, affirms, “from the fourteenth century onwards, the pulpit for the sermon succeeded the ambo of the proclamation and was placed, for acoustic reasons, in the middle of the nave, leaning or clinging to a column or wall like a swallow's nest.”<sup>97</sup> Ambos had been famously used for preaching by renowned Church fathers such as Saint John Chrysostom and Saint Ambrose, who felt that preaching from the *cathedra* wasn't very effective due to the distance from the assembly. Thus, it appears that a pastoral need developed into a development of worship. As Scripture became intelligible for most people, preaching became increasingly important and the preoccupation an optimal delivery of the sermon gave birth to pulpits (fig. 3). Pulpits were not the place of the Word of God as the ambo was, but rather convenient places to effectively deliver sermons. This innovation increased the disconnection between the two parts of the Mass, word and sacrament, since the altar and the pulpit were now distant one from the other and often the sermon had nothing to do with the Word proclaimed by the ministers at the altar.

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<sup>95</sup> Cf. Kranemann, 251.

<sup>96</sup> Cf. Farnes 107.

<sup>97</sup> “A partire dal XIV secolo il pulpito per la predica succedette all'ambone della proclamazione e venne posto, per motivi acustici, a metà della navata, appoggiato o aggrappato a nido di rondine a una colonna o alla parete; a nord delle Alpi fu inglobato nello jubé o lectorium.” Crispino Valenziano, “L'ambone: aspetti storici.” In *L'ambone*, ed. Goffredo Boselli (Magnano, Italy: Qiqajon, 2020), 90.

In the early twentieth century, the pulpit began to fall into disuse, perhaps also due to the modern electronics and microphone systems.<sup>98</sup> The priest celebrant would read, from the altar, one reading (an epistle) and the Gospel, in addition to the gradual which did not involve the answer of the assembly. Since people did not understand Latin, the readings were read in a low voice while people were praying novenas and rosaries. The homily, or sermon, was only given during solemn masses. The result was that the Liturgy of the Word began to be understood simply as a preparation for what really mattered, the celebration of the Eucharist.<sup>99</sup> It is only through the Second Vatican Council that the Church rediscovered that “the two parts which, in a certain sense, go to make up the Mass, namely, the liturgy of the word and the Eucharistic liturgy, are so closely connected with each other that they form but one single act of worship.”<sup>100</sup> Thus, as noted above, the *General Instructions of the Roman Missal* decreed that every church must have an ambo and an altar.<sup>101</sup> Below, through the help of the official Church documents, the theology and the symbolic value of this second axis of the liturgy is presented.

### 2.3 THE AMBO IN THE OFFICIAL CHURCH DOCUMENTS

There are four main church documents that directly deal with the ambo: 1. The third edition of *The General Instruction of the Roman Missal*; 2. *Built of Living Stones: Art, Architecture, and Worship*; 3. The second typical edition of the Introduction to the *Lectionary for Mass*; 4. The Order for the Blessing of a New Lectern as found in the *Book of Blessings*.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Cf. Schloeder, 92.

<sup>99</sup> Cf. Enzo Bianchi, “Dalla messa tridentina alla riforma liturgica del Vaticano II” (2012). In *Monastero di Bose*.

<https://monasterodibose.eu/fondatore/articoli/articoli-su-riviste/6281-dalla-messa-tridentina-alla-riforma-liturgica-del-vaticano-ii?start=5>

<sup>100</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, § 56.

<sup>101</sup> Cf. *General Instructions of the Roman Missal*, § 309.

<sup>102</sup> Boyer, 63.

The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* expounds on the basic reasoning and theology of the ambo. When the Scriptures are read in a church, God Himself speaks to his people, and Christ, present in his Word, proclaims the Gospel.<sup>103</sup> The purpose of proclaiming the readings is not to develop cultural knowledge in the listeners but to allow them to enter a conversation with God. The Church teaches that Christ “is present in His word, since it is He Himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in the Church.”<sup>104</sup> Since this conversation is of pivotal importance, “a greater efficaciousness of the word is nevertheless fostered by a living commentary on the word, that is, by the Homily, as part of the liturgical action.”<sup>105</sup> Thus, the homily is eminently connected to the proclamation of the Word and its purpose is to facilitate the understanding of what has been heard. Because of the fundamental value of the Word, in every church there must be “a suitable place from which it may be proclaimed and toward which the attention of the faithful naturally turns during the Liturgy of the Word.”<sup>106</sup> A stationary ambo must be placed in a way that facilitates the listening of the Word of God, the Exultet, the Homily and the intentions of the universal prayers. Such place must be dignified and noble, large enough to allow liturgical processions and reverence.<sup>107</sup> Also, the *General Instruction* recommends the ambo to be blessed prior to its liturgical use.

The *Introduction to the Lectionary* provides further insights into this investigation. It recommends that the altar and the ambo should bear a harmonious and close relationship to one

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<sup>103</sup> Cf. *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, § 29.

<sup>104</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, § 7.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, § 309. Cf. Sacred Congregation of Rites and Consilium for the Implementation of the Liturgy Constitution, Instruction on Implementing Liturgical Norms *Inter Oecumenici* (Sept 26, 1964). In *Adoremus Bulletin*.

<https://adoremus.org/1964/09/inter-oecumenici/>

<sup>107</sup> Cf. *Built of living Stones*, § 61.

another.<sup>108</sup> Their resemblance helps the assembly to recognize that both liturgical axes form an integral part of the Eucharist, making visible what *Dei Verbum* asserted, that the Church “receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life from the table both of God's word and of Christ's body.”<sup>109</sup> In fact, “the celebration of Mass in which the word is heard and the Eucharist is offered and received forms but one single act of divine worship.”<sup>110</sup>

Although these documents stress the importance of the ambo in liturgical spaces, like the case of the chair of the priest celebrant, no prayer of blessing or dedication of the ambo appears in *The Order of the Dedication of a Church and an Altar*. The assumption is that all the liturgical furnishing of a church are blessed at once when the church and the altar are dedicated. Yet, I believe that an opportunity for teaching the faithful about the importance of the Word and of the ambo as its place is lost. As for the case of the blessing of the chair of the priest celebrant, I believe that these rites should find a place within *The Order of the Dedication of a Church and an Altar*, or at least in the appendix.

The beautiful prayers found in the *Book of Blessings* speak eloquently of the role of the Word within the Christian assembly. When the blessing occurs within Mass, the Book of the Gospel and the Lectionary are carried in the entrance procession by the deacon and the reader. While the Book of the Gospel is enthroned on the altar, symbol of Christ, the Lectionary is brought to the celebrant who holds it up before the assembly and says, “May the word of God always be heard in this place, as it unfolds the mystery of Christ before you and achieves your salvation within the Church.”<sup>111</sup> These are remarkable words that speak loudly of the purpose

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<sup>108</sup> “Introduction to the Lectionary,” in *Lectionary for Mass* (New Jersey, NJ: Catholic Book Publishing Corp., 1998), § 32.

<sup>109</sup> *Dei Verbum*, § 21.

<sup>110</sup> “Introduction to the Lectionary,” § 10.

<sup>111</sup> “Order for a Blessing on the occasion of the Installation of a new Episcopal or Presidential Chair, a new Lectern, a new Tabernacle, or a new Confessional,” § 1175.

and power of the Word of God. After this introduction, the Lectionary is carried by the reader to the ambo, thus consecrating this as the place of the Word. When the blessing is carried out outside Mass, the words of introduction are even sharper. They define the ambo as “the symbol to us all of the table of God’s word that provides the first and necessary nourishment for our Christian life.”<sup>112</sup> Thus, even the liturgical books define the ambo not just as a practical furnishing, but as the symbol of the nourishment for Christian life. The faithful are not only nourished at the table of the Eucharist, but also at the table of the Word. This same theme is reposed in the prayer of blessing, adding that those who proclaim the Word from the ambo are called to show how to direct one’s life, they are called to be teachers of faith.<sup>113</sup> The Word nourishes and instructs the assembly, and this fundamental work is exercised from the ambo.

A point could be made that the ambo, being the table of God’s Word, should be used only for the proclamations of Sacred Scriptures within the Liturgy. Nonetheless, Church documents allow it to be used for other purposes, including the homily. We have already seen how, throughout history, the homily became a sermon and became *de facto* independent from the proclaimed readings. The Second Vatican Council, especially through its Constitution on the Liturgy, reinstated the purpose of the homily: “by means of the homily the mysteries of the faith and the guiding principles of the Christian life are expounded from the sacred text, during the course of the liturgical year.”<sup>114</sup> The homily is not a moralistic sermon but a way to make actual the Word that has been proclaimed:

For many centuries the sermon was often a moral or doctrinal instruction delivered at Mass on Sundays and holy days, but it was not necessarily integrated into the celebration itself. Just as the Catholic liturgical movement that began in the late nineteenth century sought to re-integrate personal piety and liturgical

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., § 1181.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., § 1189.

<sup>114</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, § 52.

spirituality among the faithful, so there were efforts to deepen the integral bond between the Scriptures and worship.<sup>115</sup>

In order to faithfully fulfill this duty, the homilist must have easy access to the Lectionary or to the Book of the Gospels. The *General Instruction* says that “the priest, standing at the chair or at the ambo itself or, when appropriate, in another suitable place, gives the homily.”<sup>116</sup> It seems that only the bishop is allowed to sit on the *cathedra* while preaching; thus, it would be difficult for a homilist to give a homily standing and holding the liturgical books at the same time. It is my opinion that, in order to safeguard the unity between the Word proclaimed and the homily, the preferred place to give a homily is the ambo, the place of the *munus docendi*. Already in the fourth century, “Saint John Chrysostom preached from an ambo because he could be understood better than if he spoke from the *cathedra* or throne at the far end of the church; Ambrose of Milan and others also adopted this practice, and in the eighth century the pope was preaching from an ambo at Santa Maria Maggiore.”<sup>117</sup> This development in the *lex orandi* shapes the *lex credendi* giving the homilist a prominent and symbolic place for teaching the faith in Christ, identifying him as a true prophet and teacher.

In conclusion, reaffirming the importance of Sacred Scripture in the liturgy through the abovementioned documents, the Second Vatican Council restored the ambo as the table of God’s Word, from where the assembly is nourished and instructed.<sup>118</sup> Church documents confirm that the Word and its homiletic actualization are an essential element in the celebration of the Eucharist and underline the role of the homilist as teacher. The inherent connection between the

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<sup>115</sup> Congregation For Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, *Homiletic Directory*, (29 June 2014), §1. At The Holy See. Accessed November 7, 2022.  
[https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccdds\\_doc\\_20140629\\_diretto rio-omiletico\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20140629_diretto rio-omiletico_en.html)

<sup>116</sup> *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, §136.

<sup>117</sup> Kieckhefer, 86.

<sup>118</sup> Cf. *Introduction to the Lectionary*, §10.

ambo and the *munus docendi* will follow, demonstrating how the prophetic office is a key to understand the symbolic value of this liturgical axis.

## 2.4 THE AMBO AND THE *MUNUS DOCENDI*

The *munus docendi* is the teaching or prophetic office received by means of Baptism or Ordination. Yet, what is a prophet? The answer to this question is very important because it clears up many wrongly preconceived notions about this *munus*. According to Schmemmann, a prophet is one who always discerns the will of God, one who hears His voice and one who is a witness and an agent of divine wisdom.<sup>119</sup>

In *The Priestly Ministry*, Cardinal Dulles begins his analysis with the prophetic office. In fact, the Council of Trent affirmed that the preaching of the Gospel is the bishops' chief task (*praecipuum Episcoporum munus*).<sup>120</sup> Consequently, presbyters, as the main assistants to the bishops, must take this *munus* very seriously. Joseph Ratzinger, especially in his early works, applauded the Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, *Presbyterorum Ordinis* (1965) with its emphasis on the prophetic office: "since no one can be saved who does not first believe, priests, as co-workers with their bishops, have the primary duty of proclaiming the Gospel of God to all."<sup>121</sup> Also more recent documents like *Pastores dabo vobis* affirms that "the priest is first of all a minister of the word of God."<sup>122</sup> To be a minister of the Word cannot be reduced to simply proclaiming it; it involves understanding it, living it, announcing it.

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<sup>119</sup> Cf. Schmemmann, 100.

<sup>120</sup> Cf. Dulles, 16.

<sup>121</sup> Decree on the ministry and life of priests *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, (7 December 1965), §4. At The Holy See. Accessed May 7, 2022.

[https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19651207\\_presbyterorum-ordinis\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_presbyterorum-ordinis_en.html).

<sup>122</sup> John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, §26.



Giving priority to the Word of God, however, the prophetic does not displace the priestly and kingly office; word and sacrament are inseparable. It could be argued that the prophetic *munus* is the most difficult to exercise for a priest. As the Congregation for the Clergy points out in *The Priest and the Third Christian Millennium - Teacher of the Word, Minister of the Sacraments, and Leader of the Community*, the power of the Holy Spirit does not guarantee all the acts of sacred ministers in the same way. For example, when administering the sacraments, the efficaciousness of the words and actions is assured to the extent that not even the sinful condition of a minister can impede the fruit of grace. Yet, in preaching, the human qualities of the minister acquire notable importance as they can either promote the effectiveness of his preaching, or dim its splendor and obscure the meaning.<sup>123</sup> The Congregation for the Clergy insists on the importance of preparation for a fruitful ministry of the Word: “the salvific effectiveness of the Word becomes more operative when its minister, who is never master of the Word, increasingly becomes its servant.”<sup>124</sup> When a priest gives a homily he must always keep in mind his role of servant, of enabling the common priesthood to fulfill its mission in their lives. Preaching is not about the preacher, but about bridging the Word to the heart of the People of God.

Ordained ministers are called to be prophets *for* the sake of the community, “making present, in the confusion and bewilderment of our times, the light of God's Word, the light that is Christ himself in this our world.”<sup>125</sup> That’s why they wear the mantle of the tradition of the

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<sup>123</sup> Cf. Congregation for the Clergy, *The priest and the third Christian Millennium Teacher of the Word, Minister of the Sacraments and Leader of the Community* (19 March 1999), §2. At The Holy See. Accessed November 7, 2022.

[https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccclergy/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccclergy\\_doc\\_19031999\\_pretres\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccclergy/documents/rc_con_ccclergy_doc_19031999_pretres_en.html).

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Benedict XVI, General Audience on *Munus Docendi* (14 April 2010), at The Holy See. [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2010/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_aud\\_20100414.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20100414.html)

Church in faithfulness to the deposit of the faith, and must deliver the Word of God untainted, unfiltered and uncorrupted, especially by their own opinions or the fads of the day. A noble and prominent ambo aids the ministers in fulfilling this role, giving them the authority of a teacher who unfolds the Word of God in the name of the Church. As Boyer relates, “every ritual can be subdivided into sign and symbol. A sign is a thing, object, person, or circumstance that represents or points toward another thing, object, person, or circumstance. In contrast, a symbol is an action that reveals a relationship; it is not a thing.”<sup>126</sup> Thus, the ambo is not just a sign but a symbol, the symbol of the authenticity to the faith that goes back to the relationship between Christ and his successors.

Yet, the prophetic office is not limited only to the ordained. Although they have an obligation to properly feed and instruct God’s flock, they are not the ministers of the domestic church. This role, or office, in the domestic church, is fulfilled by the spouses. It is a very serious commitment before God, a duty and a right in service of the family God established. As ordained ministers are charged with transmitting true faith to the faithful, Christian spouses have the duty to transmit the faith to their children. As we have seen above, a prophet is one who always discerns the will of God, one who hears His voice as a witness and an agent of divine wisdom.<sup>127</sup> In providing for their family, parents must above all provide for the transmission of the faith to their children, announce the Good News to them, teach and guide them to be open to the will of God. Schmemmann refers to this *munus* as “the gift of discernment and understanding, of the true possession, in Christ and with Him, of ourselves and of our lives.”<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Boyer, 65.

<sup>127</sup> Cf. Schmemmann, 100.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 102.

To fulfill this office, the ministers of the domestic church are more effective by example than by words as they must live this openness to the will of God themselves at all times. There is not an ambo *per se* within the domestic church; the teaching ministry is expressed in the spouses' very life. Parents' temptation at times to delegate the transmission of the faith to catechists or teachers is misplaced. While catechists may teach doctrine which is needed to receive the sacraments, children, on the other hand, receive faith from the parents by observation and by osmosis. They cannot neglect nor abdicate this duty hoping that faith will appear magically in their children with just with one hour a week of catechism. It is very clear that this model does not work. Children always look at their parents for validation of what they have received. That is why the ambo plays a pivotal role in forming parents as prophets and teachers of the domestic church. Giving due reverence to the Word and the homily empowers parents to apply Scripture to their lives and, consequently, to the lives of their children (fig. 4). Realizing that what is proclaimed from the ambo goes beyond human wisdom and has a consequence in the way they live their lives, the ministers of the domestic church will be able to be witnesses, with their lives, to the Word.

To fulfill its role within the Christian assembly, the ambo must respect the practical considerations described in the official documents of the Church. How does the Church envision the ambo within the liturgical space? Where should it be located?

## **2.5 PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

As we have seen above, the place and shape of the ambo within the liturgical assembly underwent several transformations throughout history. The Second Vatican Council, recovering

the important role of the Word of God in the liturgy, rediscovered some of its most ancient features and retained the liturgical development of the two past millennia.

Thanks to microphones and sound systems, the need to place it in the middle of the assembly or in the middle of the nave has vanished. Thus, what are the practical considerations of the ambo, so that this symbol may shine and fulfill its role within the liturgical space?

Crispino Valenziano identifies four symbolic requirements.<sup>129</sup>

### **2.5.1 The ambo is a monument.**

With all probability, the ambo was initially made of wood both in the synagogues and in the early churches. Yet, according to Valenziano, the Church soon began to see this special place as the empty tomb of Christ and transformed it into a monument decorated with mosaic, frescos, sculptures, and monumental decorations.<sup>130</sup> It is while sitting on the stone rolled back from the empty sepulcher that the angel announced to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary that Christ had risen (Matthew 28:1-10). And this is the mission of anybody who approaches the ambo: to announce the *kerygma*, the Good News that the tomb is empty, that Christ is truly risen. Thus, since the tomb was made of stone, the ambo should be made of stone to repropose this symbolic value more effectively. Furthermore, since there must be a strong resemblance between the ambo and the chair, as we have seen above, and in order to safeguard the unity of the ambo and chair, it seems fitting that the same materials be used for both these symbols.

### **2.5.2 The ambo is a unique monument.**

As for the case of the Minor Basilica of San Clemente, in Rome, at times more than one ambo was used a church. A lesser ambo was used for the proclamation of the prophets or the epistle, and a higher ambo was used for the proclamation of the Gospel. This arrangement

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<sup>129</sup> Cf. Valenziano, "L'ambone: aspetti storici," 90.

<sup>130</sup> Cf. Ibid., 90.

visually spoke of a different rank between the readings proclaimed. As the official documents affirm, this practice is contrary to the faith of the Church, who holds the totality of Scripture as Word of God.

### **2.5.3 The ambo is an oriented monument.**

Traditionally, churches were built facing east, so that the assembly would be oriented toward the rising sun, symbol of Christ. Since this tradition could not always be preserved due to the practical matters, the Church has always claimed that the liturgical east coincides with the apse of the church. According to Valenziano, the ambo must be placed in the east, tending toward the center, because it is Christ himself that speaks to the assembly.<sup>131</sup> Thus, a central positioning of the ambo in the sanctuary seems to be a truly “a suitable place from which [the Word of God] may be proclaimed and toward which the attention of the faithful naturally turns.”<sup>132</sup> A good example is the ambo at St. Joseph’s Cathedral in San Jose, CA (fig. 5)

Bergamo and Del Prete, Italian liturgical architects, see a strong connection not only between the ambo and the altar, but also between the ambo and the *cathedra*. When approaching the ambo, the minister does so on behalf of the presider. Because of this, “there is no problem that the one who presides is behind the reader: it is in fact a position deriving from the symbolic connotations and not from the functional ones of speaking and hearing.”<sup>133</sup> It is important that the three symbols are on different levels, not obstructing the view, but a similar arrangement has also been used in St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome (fig. 6).

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<sup>131</sup> Cf. Ibid., 91.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid, 309. Cf. *Inter Oecumenici*, § 96..

<sup>133</sup> “Non vi è alcun problema che chi preside stia alle spalle di chi legge: si tratta infatti di una posizione determinata dalle connotazioni simboliche e non da quelle funzionali del parlare e dell’udire.” Bergamo, 233.

#### 2.5.4 The ambo is a high monument.

According to Valenziano, “whatever the reliability of the etymologies, it was called “ambo” because it goes up (*anabaíno*), or because it surrounds those who enter it (*ambio*), or because it has the staircase on two sides (both); it was also called analogium (*ana-lógos*) because it proclaims the Word that comes from above, or *pirgus* (*py´rgos*) because it is elevated as a “tower”, and *suggestus* with varied accentuation of “high place” of the Word.”<sup>134</sup> Thus, this characteristic of the ambo is already clear by its very name.

In addition, apart from the empty tomb, the ambo has been seen as a representation of a holy mountain, like Mount Sinai or Mount Tabor, from where God spoke to his people, or as the high place mentioned by Isaiah, “on a bare hill raise a signal, cry aloud to them (Isaiah 13:2), and “get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength” (Isaiah 40:9).<sup>135</sup> As Valenziano reports, the ambo “is elevated, even higher than the altar, for the proclamation of salvation comes from on high.”<sup>136</sup> It is from the high monument that the assembly listens to the voice of God and to the voice of the herald, the prophet.

#### 2.5.5 Final words.

Although the official documents of the Church do not meticulously regulate on the position and composition of the ambo, they require every church to have a fixed ambo placed in a way to facilitate the attention of the assembly to the proclamation of the Word of God.<sup>137</sup> There are many options and the Church allows for great freedom. Notably, the ambo is often placed on

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<sup>134</sup> “Qualunque sia l’attendibilità delle etimologie, fu detto “ambone” perché si sale (*anabaíno*), o perché cinge chi vi entra (*ambio*), o perché ha la scala da due lati (*ambo*); fu detto anche analogium (*ana-lógos*) perché vi si proclama la Parola che viene dall’alto, o *pirgus* (*py´rgos*) perché elevato come “torre”, e *suggestus* con accentuazione variata di “luogo alto” della Parola.” Valenziano, “L’ambone: aspetti storici,” 91.

<sup>135</sup> Cf. Saint Germanus of Constantinople, *On the Divine Liturgy*, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary press, 1984), 63, 81.

<sup>136</sup> Crispino Valenziano, “Liturgical Architecture,” 385.

<sup>137</sup> Cf. Giuliano Zanchi, “L’ambone nella drammaturgia liturgica: elementi di teologia e criteri di estetica.” In *L’ambone*, edited by Goffredo Boselli, (Magnano, Italy: Qiqajon, 2020), 212.

one side of the altar, balanced with the chair for the priest celebrant on the other side. Yet, based on the theology and the symbolism of the ambo explained above, a raised stone ambo placed at the center of the sanctuary and reflecting the design of the altar and of the *cathedra* seems to safeguard and reflect better the meaning of this symbol. By placing it in a central line with the other two liturgical focus, yet on different levels, their unity and symbolic value will be preserved, and active participation facilitated.<sup>138</sup>

## 2.6 CONCLUSION

What moved my mother to open the Scriptures on the wake of my father's death? She believed that in such a terrible situation, her words would not be enough. Only the Word of God would be able to offer consolation and hope. I am sure that she had come to believe in the power of the Word thanks to the inspiration of Holy Spirit that, through the Second Vatican Council, restored Sacred Scriptures to the center of Christian liturgies. The ambo, as the place of the Word, has returned Scriptures to a central and essential role in the life of Christians, who now are able to receive Christ in Word and sacrament.

The symbolism of the ambo is still an uncovered treasure, just as the Word of God remains intelligible for many. Yet, it is so important that Church fathers such as Origen, Jerome, and Cesarius of Arles invited the Christians to relate to the Word as they related to the Eucharist: "just as no crumbs of the Eucharistic bread are allowed to fall, so one must not lose the word from the heart."<sup>139</sup> Pope Benedict XVI reaffirmed this belief in his post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* (2010) saying: "Christ, truly present under the species of bread and

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<sup>138</sup> Cf. Zanchi, 212.

<sup>139</sup> "Come non si permette che cada nessuna briciola del pane eucaristico, così non si dovrà perdere la parola dal cuore." Kranemann, 243.

wine, is analogously present in the word proclaimed in the liturgy.”<sup>140</sup> After the Council, churches were hastily rearranged to comply with the norms, yet, now is the time to take a step forward and implement the liturgical renewal to the fullest. By giving the ambo its proper place and dignity, Christians will be transformed by the power of God and will be able to transmit His prophetic teaching to others.

## 2.7 APPENDIX – FIGURES



Figure 1. San Clemente in Rome. 385 A.D and rebuilt in the 12<sup>th</sup> century - <https://www.liturgicalartsjournal.com/2019/09/the-iconography-of-san-clemente.html>

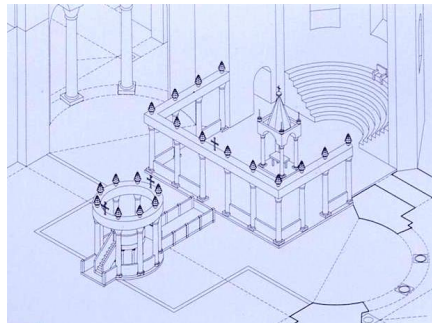


Figure 2. Hagia Sofia - 537 AD - <https://www.pallasweb.com/deesis/sanctuary-of-hagia-sophia.html>

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<sup>140</sup> Benedict XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* (30 September 2010), § 56. At The Holy See. Accessed February 25, 2023. [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_exh\\_20100930\\_verbum-domini.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20100930_verbum-domini.html)





Figure 3. Santa Maria Novella, Florence, 1443 - [http://www.museumsinflorence.com/musei/santa\\_maria\\_novella-cloist.html](http://www.museumsinflorence.com/musei/santa_maria_novella-cloist.html)



Figure 4. Ministers of the domestic church teaching their children. Photo by Maria Filippucci.



Figure 5. Interior of the Cathedral Basilica of St. Joseph in San Jose, CA – Photo by Karl Mondon.



Figure 6. Saint Peter Basilica - A temporary arrangement for the ambo in 1995 - <https://www.cattoliciromani.com/threads/33536-L-ambone-nella-Basilica-di-San-Pietro-in-Vaticano>

### **3.0 THE ALTAR AS THE SYMBOL OF THE *MUNUS SANTIFICANDI***

#### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

Sunday mornings at the Filippucci's household were sacred. We used to go to the Eucharist on Saturday night, on the first vespers of the first day, so that we could experience Sunday as the true day of rest in the Lord. My parents were quick to remind us that the Sunday rest did not mean that we could sleep in! Rather, since I remember, every Sunday morning we had to get ready because we would pray Lauds as a family. The dining room table was covered with a white tablecloth, a small candle, flowers, and a crucifix and we would all sit around it, with my father at the head. This time of prayer, mandatory for the whole family, was not just the recitation of the Psalms! The Liturgy was sung and accompanied with a guitar played by my father, or later, by my mother. The long readings of the Office of Readings were proclaimed, followed by a Gospel by chosen at random and, after that, the one who led the celebration would ask questions to the family on how the Word enlightened the previous week. It was a beautiful time in which we could reconcile with one another and ask questions about the action of God in our lives. After Morning Prayer, that lasted around two hours, we would conclude this intense spiritual family time with a fantastic Italian lunch!

As I look back, I regret all the fussing I did when I was young! My parents took their mission as ministers of the domestic church very seriously and managed, despite all odds, to transmit the faith. Those liturgies around the dining room table surely played a pivotal role in my life and in the lives of my siblings.

I imagine that the first Christian liturgies must have resembled this. A group of people, gathered around a table, listening to the Word of God, and applying it to their lives. Obviously,

the big difference is that, while my father could not, they would also celebrate the Eucharist, “the fount and apex of the whole Christian life.”<sup>141</sup> The table found in the Upper Room in the Cenacle, similar to the table in our dining room table, was the center of the Christian liturgy and it was soon designated, in a typological fashion, as an altar.<sup>142</sup> This is a fundamental issue that informs the whole theology of the altar: “despite the identity of the name, the Christian altar is never to be compared with the pagan or Jewish altar; in fact, the latter enjoy a sacredness that is the result of a theological statute owned in their own right, while the concept of the Christian altar is nothing more than an extension of the sacrificial typology of the Eucharist.”<sup>143</sup>

Similarly to the chair of the priest celebrant and to the ambo, the Christian altar also been subject to several alterations in history. The Second Vatican Council, through *Sacrosanctum Concilium*’s call for the renewal of the sacred buildings and the subsequent liturgical documents and instructions, has been a true recovery of our Tradition, and at same time an important development. How does the shape and location of the altar shape our liturgy, and consequently, our faith? What were the key factors that led to its architectural and liturgical development? What does the Church say about the arrangement of the church after the Second Vatican Council? Does the *munus sanctificandi* offer a theological interpretation of this symbol? How is the ecclesiology of the Church influenced by the location and the shape of the altar?

Many books have been written on the Christian altar; this chapter aims to identify the key historical and theological elements that are necessary for this liturgical focus to fulfill its mission with both the ordained ministers and the laity.

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<sup>141</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, § 11.

<sup>142</sup> Cf. Enrico Mazza, “Tavola e altare: due modi non alternativi per disegnare un oggetto liturgico.” In *L’altare*, ed. Goffredo Boselli (Magnano, Italy: Qiqajon, 2019), 75

<sup>143</sup> “Nonostante l’identità del nome, l’altare cristiano non è mai da comparare con l’altare pagano o giudaico; infatti, questi ultimi godono di una sacralità che è frutto di uno statuto teologico posseduto in proprio, mentre la concezione dell’altare cristiano non è altro che una estensione della tipologia sacrificale dell’eucaristia” Mazza, 58.

### 3.2 THE ALTAR THROUGHOUT HISTORY

As mentioned above, the Last Supper provides the first clue regarding the most ancient altar used for the celebration of the Eucharist. When Jesus gathered in the Upper Room with his disciples, he used as altar the table prepared to celebrate Passover. After the Resurrection, the disciples of Emmaus met a mysterious man and discussed about Scriptures. In the evening, while at table, they recognize him as Jesus at the breaking of the bread. Although no archaeological remains of the earliest Christian altars have reached us, most probably the Apostles, and the first Christian communities they founded, followed the early practice, and used a simple wooden table to celebrate the Eucharist.<sup>144</sup> This is testified by the most ancient representations of a Christian altar, discovered in Catacombs of St. Callixtus and Priscilla in Rome (fig.1 and fig.2).<sup>145</sup>

As for the chair of the priest celebrant and the ambo, the Edict of Milan brought considerable liturgical and architectural changes; from small church-houses the community now gathered in vast basilicas. One of the most notable changes was that “as the Church developed her liturgy, stone became the predominant material for altars.”<sup>146</sup> There are many theories for this change in material. Some believe that the Christian stone altar is an adaptation of the *cartibulum*, the altar used to offer sacrifice to the Roman household god; another possibility is that pagan altars were rededicated as Christian altars; others believe that the change in material was influenced by the stone slab found in the Anastasis in Jerusalem; still others believe that it developed from the *arcosolium*, from the days when Masses were offered in the catacombs over

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<sup>144</sup> Cf. Farnes, 28; Neil Xavier O'Donoghue, “Liturgical Orientation: The Position of the President at the Eucharist.” In *Joint Liturgical Studies*, 83 (Norwich, UK: Hymns Ancient and Modern, 2017), 7; Schloeder, 63.

<sup>145</sup> Some have questioned if the fresco in Saint Priscilla actually represents the Eucharist or perhaps another kind of banquet. For more information, please refer to Robin A Jensen, “Dining in Heaven”, *Bible Review* 14, 5. (Washington, Oct 1998) 32-9.

Cf. Mazza, 58.

<sup>146</sup> Schloeder, 63.

the tomb of the martyrs (fig. 3).<sup>147</sup> This last theory is the most shared among historians and liturgists. According to Farnes, to underline the union of the martyrs with the sacrifice of Christ contributed to the fact that the table was made out of stone and as a part of the martyr's tomb.<sup>148</sup> When Christians moved to the basilicas, “the bodies of the martyrs were often transferred into these new churches, and the style of the earlier stone tombs of the martyrs may have contributed to the popularity of the use of stone in the construction of altars” (fig. 4).<sup>149</sup> Nevertheless, there was not an official Church directive on the material to be used for the altar, since “throughout the first several centuries Christian altars were also made of bronze, silver, gold, ivory and stone.”<sup>150</sup> It was only in 1596 that the Church decreed that all altars must be made of stone.<sup>151</sup> The change in the material used for altar has had strong consequences in the worship of the Church. The *lex orandi* shapes the *lex credendi*, so the Eucharist began to be seen and lived more as a sacrifice than as a banquet.

The location of the altar within a sacred space was not consistent in the Christian World. After the Edict of Milan, and especially in the fifth and sixth centuries, the altar was placed at the center of the nave in North Africa:

“The altar in those days was not in a section of the church called "the sanctuary" (a later Frankish regression to the Old Testament model), but nearer the middle of the nave, in a railed-off enclosure, with the congregation standing round on all sides of it [...]. What is now called the sanctuary was then simply called the apse, and was the place where the bishop sat with his clergy to preside over the liturgy of the word, before coming down to officiate at the altar for the "Mass of the faithful."”<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Cf. Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Cf. Farnes, 29.

<sup>149</sup> O'Donoghue, 8-9.

<sup>150</sup> Schloeder, 63.

<sup>151</sup> Cf. Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Augustin, John E. Rotelle, and Edmund Hill, *Newly Discovered Sermons, The works of Saint Augustine*, Part III, Vol. 11 (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City press, 1997), 235-236.

Cf. Frédéric Debuyst, “L’altare: opera d’arte o mistero di presenza?” In *L’altare*, ed. Goffredo Boselli (Magnano, Italy: Qiqajon, 2019), 75; Panayota Volti, “L’altare cristiano dalle origini alla Riforma Carolingia.” In *L’altare*, ed. Goffredo Boselli (Magnano, Italy: Qiqajon, 2019), 88.

During the same period, in Antioch and other churches in north Syria the altar was placed in the apse, towards the back of the church and the clergy would be in the nave of the church. In south Syria, while the altar was also located in the apse, the clergy would also sit in the sanctuary. In Rome the altar was in the western apse and the presider would celebrate facing the assembly.<sup>153</sup> After great efforts to recover the past, Bouyer and other theologians have arrived at the conclusion that “the position of the altar in the buildings has been able to vary in different periods and according to the regions.”<sup>154</sup>

The placement of the altar in the apse was probably connected with the idea of authority since it imitated the location of the secular governing cohort: “the bishop, as governor of the earthly church and founder of the great religious buildings of the congregations, assumes a more important role.”<sup>155</sup> Another explanation for the location of the altar in the apse is rooted in Jewish worship. The sanctuary, or holy place, represented the Holy of Holies of the Temple of Jerusalem and, because of this, it was often separated by veils or by a screen displaying holy images and icons, especially in the East.<sup>156</sup> In Medieval times the altar was moved closer to the back wall of the apse and it gradually it lost its cubic form, becoming longer because a gospel area on the left and an epistle to the right area was incorporated to it.<sup>157</sup> Thus, the altar was seen

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<sup>153</sup> Cf. Volti, 89.

<sup>154</sup> “La posizione dell’altare negli edifici ha potuto variare nelle diverse epoche e a seconda delle regioni.” Paul De Clerck, “Sintesi del Convegno.” In *L’altare*, ed. Goffredo Boselli (Magnano, Italy: Qiqajon, 2019), 252.

<sup>155</sup> “Il vescovo, come governatore della chiesa terrena e fondatore dei grandi edifici religiosi delle congregazioni, assume un ruolo più importante.” Volti, 91-92.

<sup>156</sup> Cf. Peter J. Elliott, “What Is an Altar (Part II)? The History of the Christian Altar” (Sept. 29, 2022). In *Adoremus Bulletin*. Accessed November 18, 2022.

<https://adoremus.org/2022/09/what-is-an-altar-the-history-of-the-christian-altar/#:~:text=A%20Sacred%20Place,the%20rest%20of%20the%20church>

<sup>157</sup> Cf. Ibid; Cf. Augustin Joseph Schulte, “Altar Side.” In *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 1. (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907). Accessed on 12 Jan. 2023.

<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01356e.htm>

as three cubes in a row, the missal was moved by the altar boy from one side to the other for the different parts of the Mass.

Beginning with the Carolingian period, eighth to ninth century, the number of altars in a single church is multiplied due to the processional and stational liturgy that began to be celebrated in the same building (fig. 5).<sup>158</sup> During the same period, other innovations began to alter the true nature of the altar.<sup>159</sup> According to Farnes, since the understanding of the altar as the table of the Lord was progressively lost, also its role within the Liturgy changed. The altar was not anymore reserved only for the bread and the wine, but it became like a platform to expose many sacred objects: lectionaries and the sacred vessels containing the Eucharistic elements; the relics of saints or even the urns containing the mortal remains; retables and images of saints.<sup>160</sup> Lastly, in the 16th century, the tabernacle itself was placed on top of the altar, which, by now, almost completely lost the mensa/table aspect.

Joseph A. Jungmann, a prominent Jesuit priest and liturgist, believed that in antiquity the bishop was the focus of the assembly and the altar/table was simply seen as a technical aid for the liturgy. As he reports, the Christian altar was “not an altar at all, in the sense of pre-Christian religions where the gift is hallowed and dedicated to God only when it touches the altar ; our Gift is intrinsically holy, dedicated to God.”<sup>161</sup> Even when the altar assumed a more fixed form, in the fourth century, it remained “a plain simple table.”<sup>162</sup> As time passed, “the altar, too, saw a great development from the simple table of olden times to the elaborate forms of recent centuries; but

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<sup>158</sup> Cf. Volti, 91;

For more information regarding the Stational Liturgy, please refer to John F. Baldovin, *Urban Character of Christian Worship*, (Rome: Pont. Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1987).

<sup>159</sup> Cf. Farnes, 30.

<sup>160</sup> Cf. Ibid., 31.

<sup>161</sup> Josef A. Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite: Its Origins and Development (Missarum Sollemnia)* (Dublin, Ireland: Four Courts Press, 1986), 254.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 255.

a clear idea of the purpose of the altar was not always kept in view.”<sup>163</sup> Thus, at least from the Middle Ages, the Christian altar has almost always been seen as the sacrificial altar of the Christian religion, a sacred object used by the ordained ministers to offer a sacrifice to God.<sup>164</sup> As O'Donoghue refers, “the altar was often almost completely hidden from the sight of the people and the central prayer of the Sunday Eucharistic liturgy was carried out almost in secret outside of the sight and hearing of the assembly” (fig. 6).<sup>165</sup> We could say that, gradually, the assembly lost its seat at the table of the Lord. By disengaging the altar from the reredos and returning it to its former and rightful place in the center of the sanctuary, the Second Vatican Council wanted to emphasize its symbolic value at the center of the assembly, to make it the natural focus in the sanctuary, and to enable it to be freestanding so that it could be incensed.<sup>166</sup> Below, the renewal brought about by the Council will be examined.

### 3.3 THE ALTAR IN THE OFFICIAL CHURCH DOCUMENTS

As evidenced by the history of the altar, its shape, material, and location within the liturgical space is not just a matter of *ressourcement* but a matter of development: “the altar represents the spatial point of reference for the Eucharistic actions. Its position and appearance

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 257.

<sup>164</sup> Cf. Ibid., 27.

It is important to note that the Jesuits changed this characteristic of the Medieval Church: “One of the novelties of the Jesuits was that as an order they did not have an obligation to pray the liturgy of the Hours in community and therefore their churches did not have a choir. Pastorally they soon realized the value of allowing people to see the actual celebration of the Eucharist. The Eucharist was still celebrated *ad orientem*, and the assembly could not properly see the sacramental elements when they were placed on the altar. But in this new liturgical aesthetic the altar was placed at the focal point of the church so that everybody could visually participate in the Eucharistic liturgy, by looking at the priest as he presided at the altar. The famous mid-sixteenth century Jesuit church of the Gesù in Rome served as the main exemplar of this new form of church architecture. Here the altar is very prominently placed in the centre of the sanctuary so that it is visible to the whole assembly.” Neil Xavier O'Donoghue, *Liturgical Orientation: The Position of the President at the Eucharist*, 25.

<sup>165</sup> O'Donoghue, 18.

<sup>166</sup> Cf. Schloeder, 68.



reflect the conception of the Eucharist of a given era and a given cultural context.”<sup>167</sup> It must never be forgotten that, as *Sacrosanctum Concilium* says, “the purpose of the Sacraments is to sanctify men, to build up the body of Christ, and, finally, to give worship to God; because they are signs they also instruct.”<sup>168</sup> So, the Council fathers, through the practical and tangible liturgical renewal, had in mind the good of the souls and the way in which they could further make clear what was celebrated and thus promote active and fruitful participation. Liturgical architecture must help the faithful to join the ritual banquet offered to the Father in Jesus Christ and, in this sense, convey the ecclesiology of the Church: “ecclesiology and liturgy intimately connected to each other, indeed intertwined in an inseparable way. This necessarily conditions the configuration of the liturgical space. The liturgical-ecclesial space, in fact, expresses the self-understanding of the assembly and of the church, it is the mirror image of a well-defined understanding of the church, of a precise ecclesiology.”<sup>169</sup>

Seen through the lenses of architectural development and theological recovery, the directives found in official liturgical books such as *The General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, *The Rite of Dedication of an Altar*, and *Built of Living Stones: Art, Architecture and Worship*, must not be seen as a despotic norm but as new and fresh development to help the liturgical assembly.

*Sacrosanctum Concilium* does not comment on the position or composition of the altar.

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<sup>167</sup> “L’altare rappresenta il punto spaziale di riferimento delle azioni eucaristiche. La sua posizione e il suo aspetto rispecchiano la concezione dell’eucaristia di una data epoca e di un dato ambito culturale”

Albert Gerhards, “Teologia dell’altare.” In *L’altare*, ed. Goffredo Boselli (Magnano, Italy: Qiqajon, 2019), 228.

<sup>168</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, § 59; CCC, § 1123.

<sup>169</sup> “L’ecclesiologia e la liturgia intimamente connesse tra loro, anzi intrecciate in modo inseparabile. Questo condiziona necessariamente la configurazione dello spazio liturgico. Lo spazio liturgico-ecclesiale, infatti, esprime l’autocomprensione dell’assemblea e della chiesa, è l’immagine speculare di una comprensione di chiesa ben determinata, di una precisa ecclesiologia.” Klemens Richter, “Comunità, Spazio Liturgico e Altare.” In *L’altare*, ed. Goffredo Boselli (Magnano, Italy: Qiqajon, 2019), 183.

The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* only mentions the altar twice, implying that there be only one altar in each church, and announcing that ecclesiastical statutes which govern the provision of material things involved in sacred worship will be reviewed after the Council.<sup>170</sup> Thus, *Inter Oecumenici* is the first document that decrees “the main altar to be constructed away from the wall so that one can easily walk around the altar and celebrate facing the people.”<sup>171</sup> *The General Instruction of the Roman Missal* reiterates this declaration and adds a statement about the overall position of the altar: “the altar should, moreover, be so placed as to be truly the centre toward which the attention of the whole congregation of the faithful naturally turns.”<sup>172</sup> These decrees already make clear that the wish of the Church to establish the altar as the center of Christian worship for both the ordained and non-ordained ministers. The three liturgical foci of the Sanctuary – the chair, the ambo, the altar – have the mission to promote active participation of the assembly that celebrates the sacrament of the Eucharist.<sup>173</sup> The Eucharist is not only celebrated by the ordained ministers, but it is the paschal banquet celebrated by the whole assembly. As the theologian Klemens Richter believes, “the altar moves towards the faithful to the extent that the Church is rediscovered as a community that prays and celebrates the liturgy.”<sup>174</sup>

From this, it is clear that the composition of the altar matters. *Built of Living Stones* explains how “the shape and size should reflect the nature of the altar as the place of sacrifice and the table around which Christ gathers the community to nourish them.”<sup>175</sup> There are many

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<sup>170</sup> Cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, § 41; § 128.

<sup>171</sup> *Inter Oecumenici*, § 91; Cf. *The Order of the Dedication of a Church and an Altar*, Ch. 4, n. 8.

<sup>172</sup> *GIRM*, § 299; Cf. *Built of living Stones*, § 56.

<sup>173</sup> Cf. “Secondo quei documenti, il presbiterio comprende tre luoghi: quello in cui è collocato l’altare, quello dell’ambone e il luogo di presidenza, tutti e tre finalizzati a favorire la partecipazione dell’assemblea che celebra.” De Clerk, 252.

<sup>174</sup> “L’altare si sposta verso i fedeli nella misura in cui la chiesa è riscoperta come comunità che prega e celebra la liturgia.” Richter, 187.

<sup>175</sup> *Built of Living Stones*, § 58.

possible shapes for the altar/table yet, I would argue, that the preferred is the square one. There are two reasons, one practical and one theological. The practical reason is that a square altar speaks of equality. In many parishes the altar is rectangular and becomes a true barrier between the celebrant and the assembly. The theological reason is that “according to the tradition of the fathers of the Church [the table] is a sign of the source of living water from which the four rivers of paradise descend which quench the thirst of the men of the four (as was thought in ancient times) parts of the world.”<sup>176</sup> Another theological interpretation is that “it is square or tends to be square, for it is a table open “to the four winds” of the world.”<sup>177</sup>

Another important point mentioned in the official documents is that the altar should not be a simple wooden table. Since the Church teaches that the altar is Christ, “its composition should reflect the nobility, beauty, strength, and simplicity of the One it represents.”<sup>178</sup> *The General Instruction of the Roman Missal* declares that “it is desirable that in every church there be a fixed altar, since this more clearly and permanently signifies Christ Jesus, the Living Stone.”<sup>179</sup> For this reason, it can be made of natural stone (or any dignified and solid material), but it is important to use the proper white altar cloth to signify the banquet of the Lord. Also, “the altar should usually be fixed and dedicated.”<sup>180</sup> Nevertheless, even if it is not consecrated, the Eucharist can validly and licitly be celebrated. In fact, “the altar is ‘sacred’ not for a particular action that has been performed on it (consecration or dedication), but for the liturgical action that is celebrated there: the Eucharist.”<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> “Secondo la tradizione dei padri della Chiesa [la mensa] è segno della fonte dell’acqua viva dalla quale scendono i quattro fiumi del paradiso che dissetano gli uomini delle quattro (come si pensava in antico) parti del mondo.” Bergamo, 242.

<sup>177</sup> Crispino Valenziano, “Liturgical Architecture,” 383.

<sup>178</sup> *Built of Living Stones*, § 56.

<sup>179</sup> *GIRM*, § 298; Cf. *Built of Living Stones*, § 57.

<sup>180</sup> *GIRM*, § 299-300; Cf. *Built of Living Stones*, § 57.

<sup>181</sup> “L’altare è “sacro” non per una particolare azione che è stata compiuta su di esso (consacrazione o dedizione), ma per l’azione liturgica che vi si celebra: l’eucaristia.” Mazza, 75.

Interestingly enough, although it seems that incensing the altar is the reason for it to be freestanding, there is no mention of it in *Built of Living Stones*, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, and only a passing comment in *The General Instruction of the Roman Missal* which leaves room for freedom and interpretation: “If the altar is freestanding with respect to the wall, the priest incenses walking around it; If the altar is not freestanding, the priest incenses it while walking first to the righthand side, then to the left.”<sup>182</sup> The clearest instruction regarding the free-standing altar is given by *Inter Oecumenici*: “the main altar should preferably be freestanding, to permit walking around it and celebration facing the people. Its location in the place of worship should be truly central so that the attention of the whole congregation naturally focuses there.”<sup>183</sup> Although there is no mention of incensing the altar, it could be assumed that walking around it refers to it.

Apart from these practical norms, the *Rite of Dedication of a Church and an Altar* makes explicit the theological symbolism of the altar. The pinnacle of this theology is the notion that the altar is “a sign of Christ himself.”<sup>184</sup> Yet, St. Cyprian rightly said that the Christian, every Christian, is ‘another Christ’ - *Christianus alter Christus*.<sup>185</sup> Thus, both the altar and every Christian are a sign of Christ. The theology expressed in the *Rite of Dedication of a Church and an Altar* and in the *Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults* can assist the Christians in understanding and fulfilling their mission in the world.

Without going into too much detail, “the parallel established between Christian dedication and initiation is [...] full of ecclesiological significance. It underlines the relationship

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<sup>182</sup> Cf. *The General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, § 277.

<sup>183</sup> *Inter Oecumenici*, § 91.

<sup>184</sup> *The Order of the Dedication of a Church and an Altar*, Ch. 4, n. 4.

<sup>185</sup> Cf. Richard Oswald, “Through baptism all are united in the royal priesthood of Jesus Christ,” (11 August 2007). In *Official Website Of The Catholic Diocese Of Little Rock*. Accessed November 7, 2022. <https://www.dolr.org/article/through-baptism-all-are-united-royal-priesthood-jesus-christ>

between the church of stones and the church as a community of Christians.”<sup>186</sup> Within the *Rite of Dedication of an Altar*, the Bishop performs several actions that are helpful to express the meaning and role of the altar in the liturgy and its relationship to the Christian assembly. These actions are: Sprinkling with water, Anointing with Chrism, Incensing, Covering, Lighting, and Kissing the altar (fig. 7). By their reverence and honor, they reveal the Church's appreciation of the altar as a sign of Christ.

As baptism purifies and seals the Christian with an indelible spiritual mark, the first action of the *Dedication of an Altar* is to purify it and setting it aside by the sprinkling with holy water. After the *Prayer of Dedication*, the Bishop proceeds with the rite of anointing in which the sacred chrism is poured in the center of the altar and at the four corners. It is by this action that the altar is declared as “a symbol of Christ, who, before all others, is and is called ‘The Anointed One’.”<sup>187</sup> As the anointing of an altar makes it a symbol of Christ, Confirmation bestows the Holy Spirit on the confirmands and “perfects the common priesthood of the faithful, received in Baptism.”<sup>188</sup> The *Rite of Dedication of an Altar* continues with the incensation: “incense is burned on the altar to signify that Christ’s sacrifice, there perpetuated in mystery, ascends to God as an odor of sweetness, and also to signify that the people’s prayers rise up pleasing and acceptable, reaching the throne of God.” In the same way, when the Rite of Christian Initiation is used at the Easter Vigil, we find the presence of incense. The next step is the covering of the altar with a white linen.<sup>189</sup> This action “indicates that the Christian altar is the altar of the Eucharistic sacrifice and the table of the Lord [...]. For this reason, the altar is

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<sup>186</sup> “Il parallelo stabilito tra dedicazione e iniziazione cristiana è dunque gravido di significato ecclesologico. Esso sottolinea il rapporto che intercorre tra la chiesa di pietre e la chiesa come comunità dei cristiani.” Paul De Clerck, “Il Significato dell’altare nei Rituali della Dedicazione,” *L’altare*, edited by Goffredo Boselli, 39-54, (Magnano, Italy: Qiqajon, 2019), 65.

<sup>187</sup> *The Order of the Dedication of a Church and an Altar*, Ch. 4, n. 22.

<sup>188</sup> CCC, § 1305.

<sup>189</sup> Cf. *GIRM*, § 117; § 304.

prepared as the table of the sacrificial banquet and adorned as for a feast.”<sup>190</sup> Similarly, after the Baptism, the neophyte is clothed with a white garment, a symbol of new dignity given by Christ’s presence. Later, the lighting of the altar occurs. This action “teaches us that Christ is ‘a light to enlighten the nations;’ his brightness shines out in the Church and through it in the whole human family.”<sup>191</sup> In the *Rite of Christian Initiation* the neophyte is presented with a lighted candle, symbol of Christ. Yet, like the altar, Christians not only receive the light of Christ but are called to become light for the world. Finally, the Bishop, at the end of the celebration, kisses the altar, sign of Jesus Christ. Also, after the neophyte is Confirmed, the Bishop greets him/her with the sign of peace, which in ancient times was a kiss.<sup>192</sup>

As De Clerk reports, Michel Andrieu, a celebrated French liturgist, describes how “the altar is first ‘baptized’ with the water that has just been blessed, then it is “confirmed” with the anointing of chrism, as was the case for neophytes.”<sup>193</sup> Similarly, Richard Kieckhefer, author of *Theology in Stone*, explains how “the altar and church were sprinkled with water and anointed with chrism; in one liturgical source the altar was expressly said to be baptized and confirmed.”<sup>194</sup> The likeness of the two rites is undeniable and it can be the key to understand the meaning of the sentence: “the altar is Christ.”<sup>195</sup> Placed at the heart of the Liturgical assembly, the altar is a sign of Christ who is present among those who gather in his name (cf. Matthew 18:20).

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<sup>190</sup> *Rite of Dedication of a Church and an Altar*, Ch. 4, n. 22.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Tim Brown, “The Sign of Peace: The ancient roots of the greeting we make at Mass” (August 17, 2017). In *Aleteia*. Accessed November 7, 2022.

<https://Aleteia.Org/2017/08/17/The-Sign-Of-Peace-The-Ancient-Roots-Of-The-Greeting-We-Make-At-Mass/>

<sup>193</sup> “L’altare viene dapprima “battezzato”, con l’acqua che è appena stata benedetta, poi viene “cresimato” con l’unzione del crisma, come avveniva per i neofiti.” De Clerck, “Il Significato dell’altare nei Rituali della Dedicazione,” 45.

<sup>194</sup> Kieckhefer, 24.

<sup>195</sup> *Rite of Dedication of a Church and an Altar*, Ch. 4, n. 4.

### 3.4 THE ALTAR AND THE MUNUS SANTIFICANDI

The symbol of the altar plays an important role in helping both laity and ordained ministers exercise their priestly office. Yet, what is a priest? In his work, Schmemmann denounces the widespread misunderstanding of priesthood in our times, due to the “old, indeed pre-Christian, clergy versus laity dichotomy, whose main emphasis is precisely on the non-priestly nature of those called laity.”<sup>196</sup> The scope of this work is not to make an in-depth analysis of priesthood; it must suffice to say that Christ is the one and true High Priest. His priesthood is rooted in his human nature so, through Baptism, all Christians share in Christ’s power to sanctify the world through his sacrifice.<sup>197</sup> Speaking about the ministerial priesthood, Pope Benedict XVI explained that “as an act of His infinite mercy, [God] calls some “to be” with him (cf. Mk 3: 14) and to become, through the sacrament of Orders, despite their human poverty, sharers in his own priesthood, ministers of this sanctification, stewards of his mysteries, “bridges” to the encounter with him and of his mediation between God and man and between man and God.”<sup>198</sup> As discussed above, the ministerial priesthood is rightfully exercised only in service of the common priesthood of the faithful.

In order to fulfill the priestly *munera*, ordained ministers, more specifically bishops and priests, celebrate the seven sacraments as a service to the People of God. Among the seven, John Paul II holds that “the Eucharist is the principal and central *raison d’être* of the sacrament of the priesthood, which effectively came into being at the moment of the institution of the Eucharist and together with it.”<sup>199</sup> Presiding at the Supper of the Lord is fundamental for the fulfillment of

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<sup>196</sup> Schmemmann, 94.

<sup>197</sup> Cf. Ibid., 94-96.

<sup>198</sup> Benedict XVI, General Audience on *Munus Santificandi* (5 May 2010), at The Holy See.  
[https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2010/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_aud\\_20100505.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20100505.html)

<sup>199</sup> Dulles, 33.

their priestly office. Thus, the altar is not just a functional place but a symbol that the one presiding is acting in *persona Christi*, the one true priest, and, at the same time, in *persona Ecclesiae*, because the ordained minister acts for the Church and with the Church. The life of one who is ordained does not belong to him anymore; it is a life offered in service and intercession for the People of God and his “mission is to ensure that all people, united to Christ, may offer themselves to God as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to him.”<sup>200</sup>

In addition, as ministers of the domestic church, spouses are called, first of all, to sanctify the life of the family. How can they do that? A good way to approach this topic is through three windows or, as some theologians like to call them, the three altars: the altar of the Eucharist, the altar of the dining room table, and the altar of the nuptial bed.<sup>201</sup> These three altars must be understood in a metaphorical sense. The main altar is that of the Eucharist, while the altar of the nuptial bed and that of the dining room table are called such figuratively.

The first altar is the altar of the Eucharist, where Christ offers himself so that all men and women can pass from death to life. The word “altar” is intrinsically linked with the word “sacrifice.” “Sacrifice” comes from the Latin *sacrum facere*, meaning to make something holy. It does not only mean to sacrifice a bloody victim, but also a blessing, a prayer. To pray, to bless, is to make something holy. The parochial and the domestic church meet, primarily, around this altar. To fulfill their *munera*, parents must gather with their children around the altar of the parochial church and create the conditions to receive the service of the ordained ministers.

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<sup>200</sup> Benedict XVI, *Munus Sanctificandi*.

<sup>201</sup> Cf. Robert Cheaib, “Teologia del talamo nuziale” (February 22, 2016). In *Briciole di Teologia*. Accessed on May 7, 2022.  
<https://www.theologhia.com/2016/02/teologia-del-talamo-nuziale-recensione.html>; Cf. Alonso Gomez Fernandez, *El Tercer Altar* (Santo Domingo, D.N., Dominican Republic: Amigo del Hogar, 2019).



The second altar is the dining room table of the Christian family.<sup>202</sup> Around the dining room table, the spouses gather with their family primarily to bless the Lord for the bread, the wine, and all the food received. In fact, it is God who created and sustains the world in being and, through food, He shows his mercy and his love for humanity. Also, as mentioned above, the dining room table is a valuable place to transmit faith to the children. The table is a propitious place for parents to have meaningful conversations with their children, to guide them as they see fit, in accordance with God's will. Thus, gathering around this domestic altar opens the possibility to transmit the faith, both when praying and when eating (fig. 8).

The third altar is the nuptial bed. It is on this third "altar" that Christian spouses express total, reciprocal, and fruitful donation to one another as a participation in the love of Christ for the Church. In Scriptures, everything that touches life is surrounded by holiness, because God is life. Thus, the conjugal act is something holy, sacred. Conjugal love is a gift that God gives to the spouses, ministers of the domestic church, through which they become collaborators with Him in the creation of new life.<sup>203</sup> Thus, the nuptial bed is like an altar on which the spouses sacrifice their "ego" in the mutual gift of their lives to each other, as marital love is celebrated. This is why it is of paramount importance to recover the dignity of the parent's bedroom and make it off limits to the children, to help them appreciate the holiness of the sacrament as they discover *original holiness*.<sup>204</sup> By being faithful to their promise to accept children lovingly from

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<sup>202</sup> Cf. Pope Francis, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Lætitia* (19 March 2016), § 9. At Holy See. Accessed November 19, 2022.

[https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20160319\\_amoris-laetitia.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia.html)

<sup>203</sup> *Amoris Lætitia*, §165.

<sup>204</sup> Cf. Redemptoris Mater Seminary of Boston, "Hidden Motherhood" (May 7, 2022), *YouTube video*. Accessed on November 7, 2022. <https://youtu.be/gG2SFJ46maw>

*Hidden Motherhood* is a short video produced by the Redemptoris Mater Seminary of Boston and recently showed at a fundraising event. I am indebted to it for the use of the concept of "original holiness".

God and bring them up according to the law of Christ and his Church, spouses sanctify the life of the family and their very own lives.

As Stancliffe clarifies, “if the bishop’s throne in the apse reminds the newly baptized of the throne of God, as it is described in the Revelation of John, then the goal of the journey is the altar, the table that offers a foretaste of that heavenly banquet at our journey’s end.”<sup>205</sup> When fashioned and located in the sacred space according to the directives of the Church, the altar of the parochial church will be able to fulfill its symbolic mission, to sanctify the celebrating assembly and, by extension, the family and the world.

### 3.5 PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Some practical concerns were already addressed in Ch. 3.3 when exploring the directives of the Church concerning the altar. Nevertheless, below will be presented some indications that may help implement the renewal of the altar as intended by the Second Vatican Council.

#### 3.5.1 To be and to look like a table.

*The Order of the Dedication of an Altar* says that “by instituting in the form of a sacrificial meal the memorial of the sacrifice he was about to offer the Father on the altar of the cross, Christ made holy the table where the community would come to celebrate their Passover. Therefore, the altar is the table for a sacrifice and for a banquet.”<sup>206</sup> Indeed, the Christian altar is a table as much as the Christian table is an altar: “it is from the theological point of view that the table of the Eucharist should be called an altar, while from the point of view of form it is, and remains, a table.”<sup>207</sup> O’Loughlin, throughout his book *The Eucharist: Origins and Contemporary*

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<sup>205</sup> Stancliffe, 24.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid; *The Order of the Dedication of a Church and an Altar*, Ch. 4, n. 3.

<sup>207</sup> “È dal punto di vista teologico che la tavola dell’eucaristia va chiamata altare, mentre dal punto di vista della forma essa è, e resta, una tavola.” Mazza, 75; Cf. CCC, § 1383.

*Understandings*, underlines the importance of the table/altar because of its connection with the tables in the homes: “the table transcends the dichotomy, which is a false dichotomy for Christians, of the sacred and the profane: the domestic is the *locus* of the sacred. The Lord has come to our table; we gather, as a priestly people, at his.”<sup>208</sup> Indeed, the Second Vatican Council’s recovery of the importance of a table helps Christians move away from the deficient understating of the Eucharist as a peace-oblation offered to an angry God. A table speaks of communion and community.

### **3.5.2 To be separated from the wall so that the Eucharist can be celebrated facing the people.**

The second characteristic of the altar is the one that is perhaps most noticeable and controversial. The Church, in documents that came out after the Second Vatican Council, establishes that the altar should be separated from the wall so that the Eucharist can be celebrated *versus populum*.<sup>209</sup> This liturgical development is extremely important and a debate is still on going.<sup>210</sup> In the past, the Eucharist was seen especially as a sacrifice offered to God and what mattered was that all eyes were “oriented” toward the East or at least toward the Lord. The Second Vatican Council, on the other hand, recovered the importance of an assembly, a people that walks together toward Eternal Life. As *Sacrosanctum Concilium* indicates, “efforts also must be made to encourage a sense of community within the parish, above all in the common celebration of the Sunday Mass.”<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> Thomas O’Loughlin, *The Eucharist: Origins and Contemporary Understandings* (London: t&tclark, 2015), 120.

<sup>209</sup> Cf. *GIRM*, § 299.

<sup>210</sup> Cf. Neil Xavier O’Donoghue, *Liturgical Orientation: the Position of the President at the Eucharist*, 42-46; John F. Baldovin, *Reforming the Liturgy: A Response to the Critics* (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2008), 108-113.

<sup>211</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, § 41.

There is still more to do in order to put into practice the Church's wishes as expressed in the Council. As Bouyer says, "every time the altar facing the people means just an altar with the priest alone (and maybe his ministers) on one side and the people on the other side, it will have only the opposite effect, as it is growingly felt by the people themselves."<sup>212</sup> As it will be made clear from the next point, simply adding an altar facing the people in the sanctuary is not enough as it may become like a barrier, a separation between the liturgical actions of the celebrant and the assembly. The ideal liturgical space is to have an assembly, laity and clergy, gathered *around* the altar, symbol of Christ.

### **3.5.3 To be the focus of attention for the whole assembly.**

The third characteristic of the altar is also the most neglected. The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* clearly states that "the altar should occupy a place where it is truly the center toward which the attention of the whole congregation of the faithful naturally turns."<sup>213</sup> In most churches today, the altar is clearly not the most prominent element. In many cases, what calls the attention is the tabernacle or a large crucifix either hanging over the sanctuary or set on a wall. Yet, "the center of Christian piety is neither the images nor the devotions, but the action of Christ that in the celebration of the sacrament reaches its culmination. Hence the need to emphasize [...] the celebration of the sacrament in which the entire Christian life culminates."<sup>214</sup>

If pastors desire to really implement the Council in their parishes, it is clearly not enough to celebrate *versus populum*. It is a beginning, but efforts must be made to move away from rows of pews through which one only sees the back of the neighbor, to a more embracing assembly.

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<sup>212</sup> Bouyer, 110-111.

<sup>213</sup> *GIRM*, § 299.

<sup>214</sup> "El centro de la piedad Cristiana no son ni las imágenes, ni las devociones, sino la acción de Cristo que en la celebración del sacramento llega a su culminación. De aquí la necesidad de subrayar [...] la celebración del sacramento en el que culmina toda la vida cristiana" Farnes, 37.

Obviously, each church is different, and the norms must adapt to the peculiar circumstances and spaces. Yet, even moving the benches on the side aisles to an angle would bring many benefits. The mass cannot be reduced to the priest's private affair. If the place where Christians gather to worship and pray are not conducive to communion, can pastors truly be effective in building a community of faith? Ideally, the assembly should be able to gather around the altar so that everyone's attention would naturally converge toward the *locus* of our salvation.

### **3.5.4 To be unique, dedicated to God alone.**

*The Rite of Dedication of an Altar* decrees that the altar must be “a unique altar on which the sacrifice of the cross is perpetuated in mystery throughout the ages until Christ comes.”<sup>215</sup> As seen above, throughout the centuries the number of altars in a church multiplied because of the stationary liturgy and to honor Mary or other Saints. As O'Donoghue excellently explained, “the symbolism of a single altar in the church representing Christ was also affected by the gradual multiplication of Eucharistic liturgies that necessitated the introduction of side altars in the West. These additional altars began to be found in every church building and while being very functional and even necessary to accommodate the liturgical sensibilities of the time, they did take away from the symbolism of a single altar representing Christ.”<sup>216</sup>

Multiple altars imply that multiple Eucharists may be offered, at the same time and in the same church. The sacrament of unity had become, in some way, a sacrament of division. That is why the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* states that “in building new churches, it is preferable for a single altar to be erected, one that in the gathering of the faithful will signify the

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<sup>215</sup> *The Order of the Dedication of a Church and an Altar*, Ch. 4, n. 4.

<sup>216</sup> Neil Xavier O'Donoghue, “Plenty Good Room: The Liturgical Need for altars of Adequate Size” (2014). In *San Vitores Theological Review*, 01 (Blessed Diego Luis de San Vitores Catholic Theological Institute: Guam, USA, 2014), 46.

one Christ and the one Eucharist of the Church.”<sup>217</sup> As Jean Leclercq, a French Benedictine monk, pointed out, “like the Church, the altar is unique: a single altar, as a single Church, a single faith, and a single Savior. The only true altar is the one on which the Church's Eucharist is realized.”<sup>218</sup>

### **3.5.5 Without images or relics on the altar table.**

The last essential characteristic of the altar is to be without images or relics on its surface. Although today it is still permissible to place relics inside the altar, it is forbidden to place them on its surface: “a reliquary must not be placed on the altar or set into the table of the altar, but placed beneath the table of the altar, as the design of the altar permits.”<sup>219</sup> The main reason for this change is that the altar is dedicated to God alone. As *The Rite of Dedication of Altar* explains, “all the dignity of the altar rests on its being the Lord’s table. Thus, the martyr’s body does not bring honor to the altar; rather the altar does honor to the martyr’s tomb.”<sup>220</sup>

### **3.5.6 Other recommendations**

Apart from these five essential characteristics to every altar/table, the documents speak about other recommendations that may help the faithful to properly celebrate the Sacred Mysteries. These are: a) to be fixed on the ground; b) to be consecrated; c) to be made of natural stone or at least of some other solid material; in either case, it must be artistically made.<sup>221</sup>

The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* says that “it is desirable that in every church there be a fixed altar, since this more clearly and permanently signifies Christ Jesus, the

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<sup>217</sup> *GIRM*, § 303.

<sup>218</sup> “Como la Iglesia, el altar es único: un solo altar, como una sola Iglesia, una sola fe y un solo Salvador. El único altar verdadero es aquel en el que se realiza la Eucaristía de la Iglesia.” Jean Leclercq, OSB, “El misterio del altar.” In *El altar, Cuadernos Phase*, 67 (Centre de Pastoral Litúrgica: Barcelona, Spain, 2017), 38.

<sup>219</sup> *The Order of the Dedication of a Church and an Altar*, Ch 4, n. 11; Cf. *Built of Living Stones*, § 60.

<sup>220</sup> *The Order of the Dedication of a Church and an Altar*, Ch 4, n. 5.

<sup>221</sup> Cf. Farnes, 35.

Living Stone.”<sup>222</sup> For this reason, it can be made of natural stone (or any dignified and solid material), but it is important to use the proper white altar cloth to signify the banquet of the Lord.<sup>223</sup> Also, “the altar should usually be fixed and dedicated.”<sup>224</sup> Nevertheless, even if it is not consecrated, the Eucharist can validly and licitly be celebrated. In fact, as stated above, the altar is ‘sacred’ not because of its consecration or dedication, but as the result of the Eucharist, the liturgical action that is celebrated there: the Eucharist.<sup>225</sup>

### **3.5.7 Final words.**

The Church always seeks continuity and renewal. The indications found in the documents of the Church must be seen in light of the Paschal Mystery and the “breaking of the bread” of the Risen Jesus with his disciples. The Liturgical space must first of all be a sign that says something that speaks to people of God’s loving plan of salvation for all. Thus, for the symbol to shine amid the assembly, it must appear unmistakably as the simple yet noble table of the Christian family where the Supper of the Lord is celebrated.

## **3.6 CONCLUSION**

One of my greatest joys when I visit home, is to witness the transmission of faith that takes place at the household of one of my siblings. The Sunday domestic celebration that we celebrated as a family now takes place in their new families. This is not just our family tradition; it is the tradition of the Church. My parents were able to fulfill their priestly office within the family simply because they had received this treasure from the Church.

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<sup>222</sup> *GIRM*, § 298; Cf. *Built of Living Stones*, § 57.

<sup>223</sup> Cf. *GIRM*, § 304.

<sup>224</sup> *GIRM*, § 299-300; Cf. *Built of Living Stones*, § 57.

<sup>225</sup> Cf. Mazza, 75.

Throughout history, the placement and composition of the altar has differed. Guided by the Holy Spirit, the Second Vatican Council and its subsequent documents, have clearly indicated the way in which the altar will be able to fulfill its symbolic mission for this generation. The altar cannot be reduced to the place where priests offer a sacrifice to God. The altar is table of the Lord; the altar is Christ, the destination of our pilgrimage through earth. When employed correctly, this symbol has the capacity to help both the ordained ministers and the spouses to fulfill their sanctifying role for the world.

### 3.7 APPENDIX – FIGURES



Figure 1. A Eucharistic fresco, Catacomb of St. Callixtus, Rome – Photo by David Macchi



Figure 2. Fractio Panis - Catacomb of Priscilla, Rome – Photo by Granger





Figure 3. The stone covering the tomb of the martyr served as an altar – Capella Greca Catacomb of Priscilla, Rome - Photo by Granger

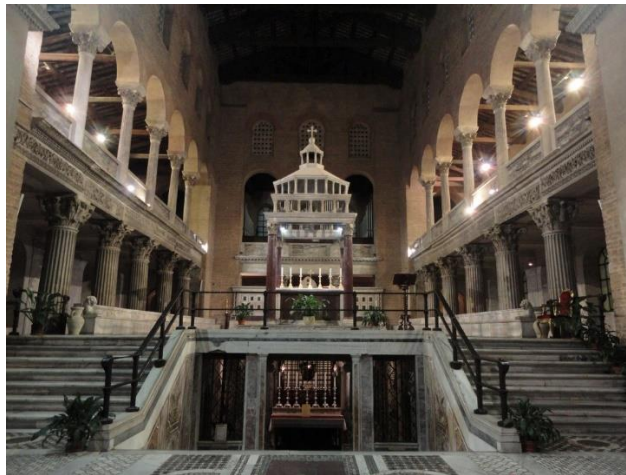


Figure 4. The sanctuary is raised above the nave level so that the altar might be built overtop the tomb of a martyr without disturbing the tomb – Saint Lawrence outside the walls, Rome - Photo by Mario De Matteis



Figure 5. An example of side altars – Norbertine monastery of Wilten. Innsbruck, Austria (1751-1755) - Photo by Peter Kwasniewski



Figure 6a. Priests celebrating *ad orientem*, hiding the altar from the assembly – Undisclosed location – Photo by Allison Girone



Figure 6b. An example of an altar with the veils drawn, may be seen in a mosaic in the church of St. George in Thessalonika (see above left) and a rare modern day example from San Nicola in Carcere, Rome, which gives some sense of this arrangement with the veils open (above right). – Photo by Shawn Tribe



Figure 7. Cardinal Sean O'Malley dedicates the new altar at St. Joseph's Parish in Lynn, MA– Photo by Pablo Gomis



Figure 8. Catholic family gathered for a meal – Photo by CNS photo/*Let There Be Light* - Kevin and Sam Sobro,

## **4.0 CHAPTER 4 – CASE STUDY**

### **4.1 INTRODUCTION**

As presented in the chapters above, the Catholic Church provides considerable flexibility in the design and layout of liturgical spaces, while emphasizing the essential elements that must be present in a sacred building. The ecclesiological foundation for the directives of the Church is that the laity is not just a passive spectator but rather plays a significant role in the celebration of the Eucharist, alongside ordained priests, who have the mission to make present and communicate Christ the Shepherd, the Prophet, and the Priest. Yet, how is this translated into practice? This study attempted to answer this question by focusing on the three liturgical axes of the Eucharist and how their placement in the sanctuary hinders or facilitates active participation.

To further prove the thesis exposed in this work, an example of a newly built church building will be examined. While presenting the way in which the chair, the ambo, and the altar were built, this case study will focus especially on their interrelation in this particular liturgical space and compare it with other church buildings and layouts. The chosen church is the Cathedral of Our Lady of Arabia in Bahrain, a building designed to encourage active participation while still preserving the traditional reverence and respect of our Faith.

### **4.2 CATHEDRAL OF OUR LADY OF ARABIA IN BAHRAIN**

The Cathedral of Our Lady of Arabia in Bahrain was consecrated on December 10, 2021, by Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle, Pro-prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelizations of Peoples. A team of Italian designers and architects, led by Mr. Mattia Del Prete, were hired in 2014 by Bishop Camillo Ballin, Apostolic Vicar of Northern Arabia, and the building committee, to deliver a building capable to serve the 90,000 Catholics in the country.



The new Cathedral has a very modern yet traditional design to it. Is built in the shape of the ark of the people of God in the desert where God met Moses and the people. It is shaped in an octagonal form, and the pews are placed around the sanctuary and the altar to promote active participation. Although the seating capacity of the Cathedral is for 2,300 people, the chair of the priest celebrant, the ambo, and the altar are the focal point, with an unobstructed view and all the pews converging toward these elements.<sup>226</sup> In the four corners of the Cathedral, there are the following: the Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament, the Chapel of Our Lady of Arabia, and the Chapel of the Confessionals. The fourth corner is for the transport elevators to and from the Cathedral and the underground parking zone (fig. 1).<sup>227</sup> In addition, there are sixteen icons, with the icon of Jesus Pantocrator in the center, that decorate the interior of the Cathedral and help people meditate and pray on the primary mysteries of the Catholic faith (fig. 2).<sup>228</sup>

From this brief overview of the Cathedral, it is possible to already draw some conclusions and comparisons. The first is that the space is open and bright, without columns obstructing the view and, consequently, not obstructing the participation of the assembly. Traditionally, columns have been employed in large buildings to support the structure and, throughout history, they have been given various theological meanings. They could represent the People of God, who are the “pillars of the Church,” with the different capitals signifying different saints: Doric columns are a symbol of male saints; ionic columns symbolize female saints; more elaborate columns were used to indicate the status of the church or building, with cathedrals having the most intricate.<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>226</sup> It must be noted that in the Cathedral of Our Lady of Arabia, the bishop’s *cathedra* is on the right of the sanctuary. This was probably done to maintain the axial structure of the liturgy when the bishop is not presiding.

<sup>227</sup> Cf. “Layout of the Cathedral Complex” (February 14, 2014). In *BahrainCathedral.org*. Accessed on 1/15/2023.

<http://bahraincathedral.org/?p=1828>

<sup>228</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*

<sup>229</sup> Cf. Philip Kosloski, “This is why churches have columns” (August 09, 2017). In *Aleteia*. Accessed on 1/23/2023. <https://aleteia.org/2017/08/09/this-is-why-churches-have-columns/>

Another interpretation is that they could indicate a progression from the mundane world to the glory of heaven, as in the original basilica of St. Peter in Rome where Iconic capitals were found in the forecourt, Corinthian capitals were placed down the nave, and Composite capitals were present around the sanctuary.<sup>230</sup> While these spiritual explanations may be appealing, they do not address the physical barrier that columns present. In fact, having one's view obstructed has definite consequences on one's ability to actively participate in the Eucharist (fig. 3). Thanks to the technical progress that allows a large building to be supported without the use of columns, the somewhat unusual layout of the Cathedral in Bahrein provides a sense of welcoming and an invitation to take part of the liturgical activity.

Another important observation regards the arrangement of the pews and the interior layout of the space. The most widespread plan for church buildings is either the "basilica" layout or a cruciform ground plan (fig. 4). The "basilica" layout is characterized by a long central nave, with one or more aisles on either side, and a raised sanctuary at the front of the church for the altar. The cruciform layout takes inspiration from the Church as the Body of Christ and, as Schloeder relates, was the predominant model for church design until the second half of the twentieth century: "Christ's head is at the apse [...]; the choir is his throat [...]; the transept and his extended arms; his torso and legs form the nave, since the gathered faithful are his body; the narthex represents his feet, where the faithful enter the church; and at the crossing is the altar, which is the altar of the church."<sup>231</sup> In both cases, the seating has traditionally been arranged in straight rows facing the sanctuary or a side altar in the aisles. Yet, "fixed parallel benches, arranged as a 'battalion', do not allow for a participatory assembly: being stuck in one place, with your back to each other, projected towards something internal to us, will never satisfy real

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<sup>230</sup> Cf. Schloeder, 230-231.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid. 30.

collective participation.”<sup>232</sup> It is true that these layouts are clearly valid and have served the Church for many centuries. Nevertheless, the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council calls for a renewed emphasis on the People of God and their active role within the liturgical action: “Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that fully conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy. [...] In the restoration and promotion of the sacred liturgy, this full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else.”<sup>233</sup> It can be said that “this was the aim of the liturgical movement of the early twentieth century and was the hallmark of the reform of the liturgy that came out of Vatican II.”<sup>234</sup> To achieve this, a similar to theater style seating has been created in the Cathedral, achieving what Kieckhefer calls *modern communal church*, a design “meant to emphasize the importance of gathering people for worship, often around an altar or a pulpit.”<sup>235</sup> As Bergamo and Del Prete explain, the disposition that allows an assembly to grow into a community can only be a “a closed hemicycle, in which each participant can see the others face to face, recognize each other, speak and listen to each other. All protagonists.”<sup>236</sup> Although the Cathedral is very large and can host a considerable number of people, no one will have to sit a great distance from the sanctuary and thus feel disconnected from the liturgical action.

Also, one cannot but be mesmerized by the “mystical crown” that adorns the Cathedral. Del Prete, a close collaborator of Francisco “Kiko” Arguello Wirtz, an artist and co-initiator of the Neocatechumenal Way with Carmen Hernandez, “created a valuable synthesis of the most

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<sup>232</sup> “Banchi paralleli fissi, disposti a battaglione, non permette di realizzare un’assemblea partecipante: stare bloccati in un posto, dandosi la schiena, proiettati tutti verso qualcosa di esterno a noi, non consentirà mai una reale partecipazione collettiva.” Bergamo, 192.

<sup>233</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, §14.

<sup>234</sup> Vosko, 78.

<sup>235</sup> Kieckhefer, 13.

<sup>236</sup> “Una figura a emiciclo chiuso, nella quale ogni partecipante possa vedere in faccia gli altri, ci si possa riconoscere, parlare e ascoltare reciprocamente. Tutti protagonisti.” Bergamo, 192.

beautiful innovations developed over the years by the New Aesthetics of the Way: a large golden dome that represent the sky, the mystic crown in which sheets of gold leaves surround the paintings and unite them in an uninterrupted strip of light, the use of a new type of modern, symbolic stained glass with geometric features, the altar at the center, the coverings in marble exteriors and interiors made of Roman straw-colored travertine, serene stone, Yellow Siena, Red Verona, Carrara marble.”<sup>237</sup> Kiko Arguello, who had already worked on large projects such as the Basilica of Almudena in Spain and the Redemptoris Mater Seminary of Denver, Colorado, “created what he called a ‘mystic crown’: a circular space at the base of the dome, entirely frescoed, with panels illustrating the salient episodes of Jesus’ life and announcing his triumphant return: ‘The images of the mystic crown intend to touch the spirit of the faithful who contemplate them. Their purpose is to help mankind to raise its spirit towards God’.”<sup>238</sup>

An important element that must be acknowledged before focusing on the sanctuary is the presence of the baptismal font in front of the altar, with steps going below the ground. *Built of Living Stones* states that “because the rites of initiation of the Church begin with baptism and are completed by the reception of the Eucharist, the baptismal font and its location reflect the Christian's journey through the waters of baptism to the altar. This integral relationship between the baptismal font and the altar can be demonstrated in a variety of ways, such as placing the font and altar on the same architectural axis.”<sup>239</sup> There is great freedom in the placement of the baptismal font in a church. For example, when David Stancliffe was the Provost of Portsmouth, he completed and reordered the Cathedral of Portsmouth and opted to place the

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<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

<sup>238</sup> Angela Pellicciari, “Bahrein Cathedral: A Project of Kiko Arguello” (9 December 2021). In *Il Foglio*. Accessed on 1/30/2023.

<https://neocatechumenaleiter.org/en/bahrein-cathedral-a-project-of-kiko-arguello/>

<sup>239</sup> *Built of Living Stones*, §66



baptismal font in the entrance of the church to underline its role as gateway to the liturgical assembly (fig. 4). Yet, placing the baptismal font at the heart of the church gives much more visibility and emphasis to Holy Baptism as “the basis of the whole Christian life.”<sup>240</sup> In addition, as related on the website of the Cathedral of Our Lady of Arabia,

“It is over that baptismal font that the faithful receive Holy Communion during the celebration of the Eucharist, as the consequence of their belonging to the new people of God. It is there also that couples are to be united in the Sacrament of Matrimony. That sacrament is linked with baptism as it requires a new death to the personal life in order to belong to another and form together, a new life, a new family. Finally, it is there that the coffin is placed for the funeral rites, for the transition from baptism to eternal life. For baptism, the base of all the sacraments, is the entry door to the community of Jesus Christ.”<sup>241</sup>

The sanctuary of the Cathedral is differentiated from the rest of the assembly by a different kind of material, Carrara marble, that separates it from the hardwood floor of the rest of the space. Noticeably, there are no altar rails so as to not create a physical barrier or separation between laity and ordained ministers. The three liturgical focuses are set on the central axis on platforms of increasing height, thus allowing the view not to be obstructed and symbolizing the sacramental procession and eschatological tension of the pilgrim church (fig. 6).<sup>242</sup> The chair, the ambo, and the altar are made of the same material – marble – and following the same design, thus underlining their interconnection. The chair of the priest celebrant is surrounded by seating for concelebrating clergy, stressing the collegiality of the ministerial priesthood. Being at the center of the apse, the priest celebrant clearly acts as the head of the body and the shepherd of the assembly, giving a sense of order to the whole congregation.<sup>243</sup> His mission to guide the assembly can clearly resonate with the role of Christian spouses to guide their families. From

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<sup>240</sup> CCC, §1213.

<sup>241</sup> “Interior of the Cathedral” (February 14, 2014). In *BahrainCathedral.org*. Accessed on 1/25/2023. <http://bahraincathedral.org/?p=1817>

<sup>242</sup> For more please refer to Bergamo, *Spazi Celebrativi*, 200-202.

<sup>243</sup> Cf. Bergamo, 193.

there, a few steps down, is the ambo, placed in a very visible and central location in order to properly fulfill its mission in the celebration: to deliver God's message.<sup>244</sup> Underscoring the importance of the proclamation of the Word and, in some cases, of its interpretation in the homily, can clearly resonate with the ministers of the domestic church and their prophetic office in service of their family. Finally, the center of the Cathedral and of the assembly is a large square altar.<sup>245</sup> The size is proportional to the assembly that is invited to partake of the banquet offered by the Lord. As O'Donoghue comments, "many contemporary altars are too small to perform their function. This is because there is a widespread neglect of the symbolic dimension of the Eucharist as a meal. Obviously, there is also a strong sacrificial dimension of the Eucharist, but this does not mean that the Eucharist is not a meal."<sup>246</sup> An altar of adequate size is necessary to make evident the communal dimension of the Eucharist, in addition to recall the domestic table and the nuptial bed as windows to Eternal life. On the other hand, although a small altar may underline the sacrificial aspect of the Eucharist, it will present it as the exclusive work of the ordained minister, rather than the perfect sacrifice offered by the whole assembly (fig. 7). This is a perfect example of the fundamental role that liturgical spaces play in the empowerment or deferment of active participation. The simple nobility of the liturgical focuses provides the priest celebrant with all the necessary tools so that the Eucharist may not just be a show people see but an event in which they are the main actors (fig. 8).

There are numerous ways in which a church can be built and in which the interior can be validly and effectively arranged. This case study simply presents one way which

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<sup>244</sup> Cf. Ibid. 196.

<sup>245</sup> Cf. Ibid.

<sup>246</sup> O'Donoghue, "Plenty Good Room: The Liturgical Need for altars of Adequate Size," 48.

seems to comply with the wishes of the Second Vatican Council and its ecclesiology which underlines the prominent role of the assembly and of the Word of God.

#### 4.3.APPENDIX – FIGURES

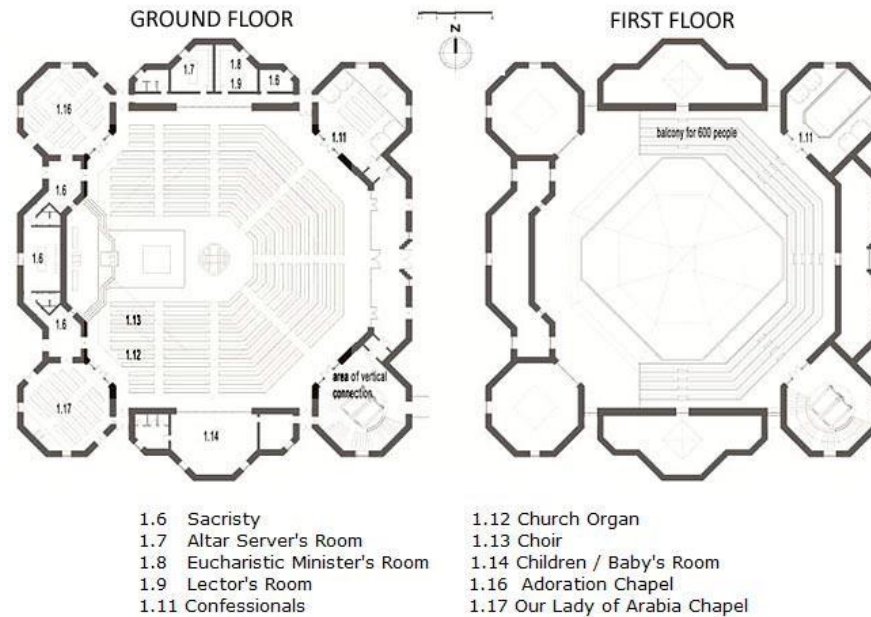


Figure 1. Interior plans of the Cathedral in Bahrain – Photo by bahraincathedral.com



Figure 2. The interior of the new Cathedral of Our Lady of Arabia in Bahrain. – Photo by epogea.eu



Figure 3. A column obstructing the view of the altar at Saint Joseph Catholic Church in Frederiksted, VI. – Photo by Andrea Filippucci

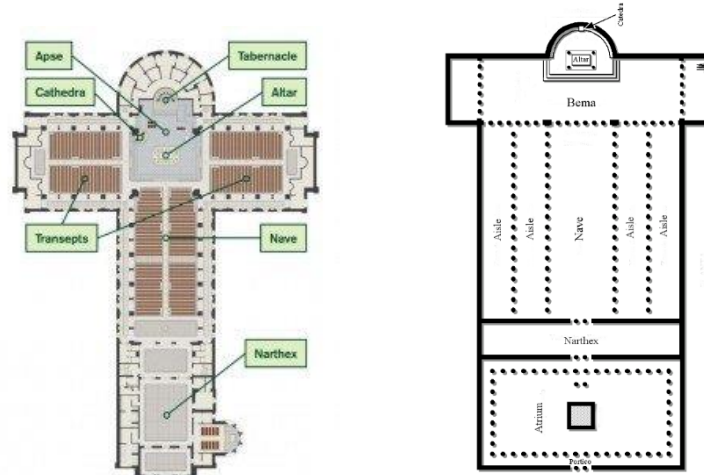


Figure 4. Interior plans of the Cathedral of the Holy Name of Jesus in Raleigh, NC (Cruciform plan) and of Old Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome (Basilica plan) – Photos from [www.raleighcathedral.org](http://www.raleighcathedral.org) and by Locutus Borg.



Figure 5. Baptismal Font at the Portsmouth Cathedral, Portsmouth, Hampshire, UK - Photo by David Iliff

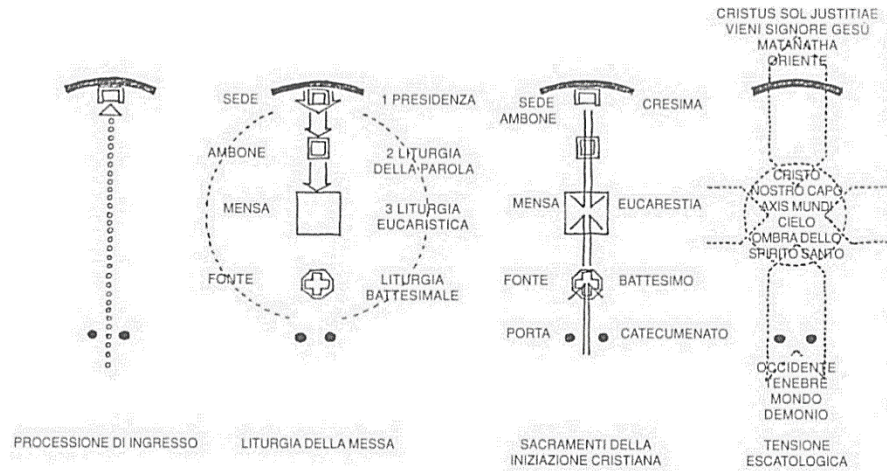


Figure 6. Sacramental and symbolic geometries of liturgical dynamics and eschatological tension: axiality – Source: *Spazi Celebrativi*, Bergamo, 200.



Figure 7. The small altar at Maria Laach Abbey church, near Andernach, Rhineland Palatinate, Germany – Photo by Tim A. Bruening.

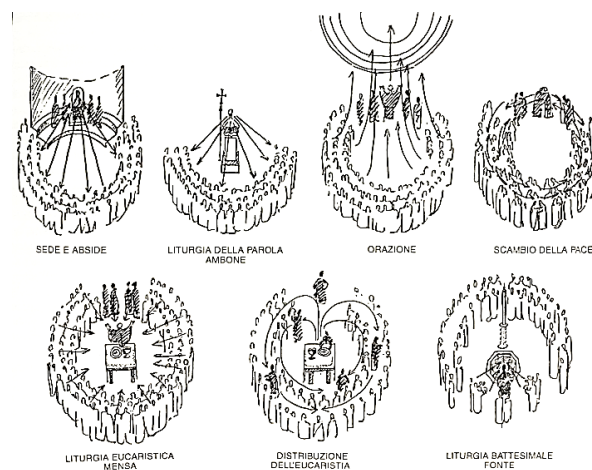


Figure 8. Sacramental geometries of the various parts of the Eucharistic rite: centrality – Source: *Spazi Celebrativi*, Bergamo, 197.

## CONCLUSION

“*Ecclesia, quid dicis de te ipsa?* Church, what do you say about yourself?”<sup>247</sup> This work attempted to answer this very profound question by examining a liturgical space and its main symbols. If it is true that the way Christians celebrate reveals what they believe, then the physical place employed for the celebration is of utmost importance. The ecclesiological stress of the Second Vatican Council was to rediscover the Church as truly a community of faith gathered in the name of Jesus Christ who gives thanks to the Father through the Holy Spirit. Clearly, even the most beautiful and functional building will not automatically transform people’s lives and help them mature in their faith. Yet, I argue, liturgical symbols are so important that, when truly understood, they can facilitate and promote the development of a Christian community.

This thesis focused on the three liturgical axes of the Eucharistic liturgy and their relation to the *munera* received in Baptism and Holy Orders. To narrow down the scope of the study, this work particularly focused on the parochial church, led by ordained ministers, and the domestic church, led by Christian spouses. The claim is that the chair of the priest celebrant, the ambo, and the altar, are more than functional furniture; they are the symbols and the axis around which the liturgy is celebrated and convey a very clear message: in Christ, both ordained ministers and Christian spouses, are called to be kings/shepherds, prophets, and priests.

The three *munera* are explicitly mentioned in the Baptism of Children at the Anointing after Baptism with these words: “As Christ was anointed Priest, Prophet, and King, so may you live always as a member of his body, sharing everlasting life.”<sup>248</sup> Also, during the Celebration of the sacraments of Initiation for adults, when the three sacraments are not given together the newly baptized is anointed with holy chrism after listening to these words: “He now anoints you

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<sup>247</sup> Karol Wojtyła, *Sources of Renewal: The Implementation of the Second Vatican Council*, 36.

<sup>248</sup> *Rite of Baptism for Children*, § 98.



with the chrism of salvation, so that, united with his people, you may remain forever a member of Christ who is Priest, Prophet, and King.”<sup>249</sup> Thus, the Catechism of the Catholic Church affirms that in Baptism every Christian is “incorporated into Christ who is anointed priest, prophet, and king.”<sup>250</sup> Also, the sacrament of Holy Orders “configures the recipient to Christ by a special grace of the Holy Spirit, so that he may serve as Christ’s instrument for his Church. By ordination one is enabled to act as a representative of Christ, Head of the Church, in his triple office of priest, prophet, and king.”<sup>251</sup> Since the Church is the body of Christ, and since the Church is formed by both ordained and non-ordained ministers, it is clear that these most important offices must be reflected and inform the liturgical space, the *ecclesia* where the parochial and the domestic Church meet.

The first liturgical axis investigated is the chair of the priest celebrant. A brief historical excursus demonstrated how the chair is not simply a development of the synagogal “seat of Moses” nor a direct consequence to the imperial church; early Christian art testifies to how the chair was mostly seen as the link between the assembly and their bishop, the apostles, and ultimately Christ. Having been lost throughout the centuries, a seat connected to the bishop’s *cathedra* was introduced by the Second Vatican Council: a symbol of the head of the body, that is Jesus Christ. The ordained minister, acting in *persona Christi capitis*, presides over the assembly from the chair, guaranteeing order and unity to the celebration. This is why, to preserve its symbolic value, the chair should not be part of the assembly nor just a stool. The main celebrant’s specific role in the liturgy by virtue of Holy Orders is to make present Christ, the Good Shepherd. In the celebration, the presider acts as a true shepherd whose authority comes by

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<sup>249</sup> *RCIA*, § 319, 217.

<sup>250</sup> *CCC*, § 1241.

<sup>251</sup> *CCC*, § 1581.

reason of service. That's why the chair clearly speaks of the *munus regendi*, especially exercised from the *cathedra* in service to the people of God. Similarly, a family needs order and unity. Christian parents are called to be the shepherds of the domestic church and lead their families in holiness and virtue. The *cathedra* is of paramount importance to help them and form them in this role because it shows that to lead is to serve, and to serve is to love. The practical considerations for the chair are a way to make the symbol of *munus regendi* shine and fulfill its mission for all celebrants.

The second Chapter focused on the ambo and its symbolic correlation to the *munus docendi*. Vatican II has clearly given more prominence to the Word of God and, through the ambo, liturgically implements its centrality in the life of the Church. Until the twelfth century, the Word of God and the ambo had an important role in Christian liturgies. Yet, as Latin fell into disuse, the laity, and perhaps even some ordained ministers, lost interest in Scripture and focused more on the preaching of sermons, employing pulpits for better deliverance. Yet, the Second Vatican Council emphasized that when the Scriptures are read in church, Christ is present. The ambo is the table of God's Word and every church is required to have a dignified and noble place from where the assembly is nourished and instructed. Thus, proclaiming the Word of God in the assembly or instructing through a kerygmatic homily, the ambo speaks loudly of the prophetic office. Ordained ministers are called to exercise this office in service to the community, making sure that what is transmitted is not their opinion but the Good News and the treasure of the Tradition of the Church. Thus, the ambo is the symbol of the authenticity to the faith that goes back to the relationship between Christ and his successors. Also, Christian spouses are called to instruct and nourish their families as true prophets of Jesus Christ by their very lives, guided and informed by what is proclaimed from the ambo. The ambo, as the symbol of the *munus docendi*,



should be crafted in a noble yet simple fashion, be fixed, and be elevated, to guarantee and determine the prominence of the Word of God in the lives of the faithful.

The third liturgical focus presented is the altar. It can't be denied that a table was used as an altar in the first scriptural references of the Eucharist and in the earliest fresco found in the catacombs. As Christianity developed, a more elaborated fashion was employed and, together with other factors described above, the Christian altar slowly lost its most genuine roots. Vatican II, seeking to recover, as well as develop the liturgy, placed the altar in the middle of the assembly, as its heart, making evident that the whole assembly participates at the banquet/sacrifice. The altar is the symbol of Christ, and every faithful that approaches it is called to be another Christ. The ordained minister, acting in *persona Christi capitis*, re-presents in time and space the Paschal Mystery; the domestic church gathers in faith around the altar of the church, and being sanctified, approaches with similar awe her other two altars: the domestic table and the nuptial bed. To convey this important priestly office, the Christian altar should look like a table, be separated from the wall, and be placed in the center of the assembly so as to be the focus of attention.

The final chapter of this work has presented a church, the Cathedral of Our Lady of Arabia in Bahrain, which was built with *active participation* in mind and following the directions of the Second Vatican Council. It is not just about entering a holy and beautiful space, but about being facilitated to concelebrate the Paschal Mystery together with the main celebrant. Placing the chair, the ambo, and the altar on the central axis, yet, on different height levels, underscores the importance of each focus and its symbolic value for both the ordained minister and the assembly.

I believe that this work could be an important foundation for future works on the theological understanding of liturgical spaces. Admittedly, the greatest limitation of this work is that it focused especially on the ministers of the parochial and the domestic church. It would be noteworthy to keep investigating this subject including deacons and the way in which they live out the *tria-munera* in their ministry, as well as lay people who are not spouses or who are not directly connected to a domestic church, such as grandparents, single people, or consecrated Christians. The Church is not only formed by priests and Christian spouses, but by every baptized. Also, each liturgical space is different and the way in which the liturgical focuses are placed may vary. This thesis simply presented one way to arrange the sanctuary that promotes active participation and fosters the development of the munera in both ordained ministers and Christian spouses.

In conclusion, a church building is much more than just a functional space. The way the liturgical space is organized conveys the ecclesiology that a parish community wishes to transmit. A liturgical space without a clear head, that does not give prominence to the Word of God, and that does not make evident that all participants concelebrate in the sacrifice and banquet offered at the altar, will have consequences for both the parish church and the Christian family. All Christians are called to be priests, prophets, and kings, in union with Christ Jesus, and fulfill the mission they have received through the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Orders. As *Sacrosanctum Concilium* states, “when the liturgy is celebrated something more is required than the mere observance of the laws governing valid and lawful celebration; it is also their duty to ensure that the faithful take part fully aware of what they are doing, actively engaged in the rite, and enriched by its effects.”<sup>252</sup> This work is a call for bishops and pastors, together with their

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<sup>252</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, § 11.

local community, to pray in openness for the prompting of the Holy Spirit, and to discern how the liturgical space should be shaped so that the assembly, gathered in the faith of Christ and empowered by the sacraments, may fulfill its mission in the world and in society.

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