

Sensing the Sacred:

Toward a Pastoral Liturgical Theology of Church Architecture

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I love to visit churches. If there is a church anywhere around I want to see it. Talking about what I see and how it fits with my liturgical, theological, and aesthetic perspectives has been an ongoing fascination of mine, as traveling companions can attest. Now there is a book that I wish I could have read years ago to provide additional insights.

In Kevin Seasoltz's *A Sense of the Sacred: Theological Foundations of Christian Architecture and Art* (Continuum 2005), I recognized the church of my childhood and youth in Abilene, Kansas---a square with seating oriented toward one corner where the pulpit, table, choir loft, and organ were situated (cf. 201), as well as the Richardsonian Romanesque church with its 108 Tiffany windows that I pastored in Dubuque, Iowa (cf. 202, 206).

The more of the book I read, however, the more my thoughts turned, not to the well-known churches described in the book in which I too have delighted, nor to the delightful surprises of finding churches that have captivated me on brief visits, e.g. the Henri Matisse chapel for the Dominican sisters at Vence, France or the very small All Saints Church, Tudley, England with its series of windows by Marc Chagall. Rather I found myself relating what I was reading to Custer Lutheran Fellowship, where Linda and I worship week by week while at our summer cabin.

It is a "garden variety" church in the Black Hills of South Dakota—not associated with an educational institution or a monastery or a pilgrimage site. We experienced some of what went on as that congregation planned for, built, and then used a major addition including a new worship space. As I identified key affirmations of the book, I would say to myself "Yes, that's what happened at CLF." or "That's what was at stake in what CLF decided to do."

Custer Lutheran Fellowship is an ELCA congregation founded in 1965. It is a vibrant, active congregation with many children, youth, and young families, as well as a retired contingent. While it is clearly a church in the

Lutheran tradition, many like us come from other denominational backgrounds. Indeed, the “cradle Lutherans’ are in the minority.

With Kevin’s book in one hand and my experience of Custer Lutheran Fellowship in the other, I share the following affirmations about a pastoral liturgical theology of church architecture.

1. Church architecture can itself be liturgy: the work of the people on behalf of the people.

Two decisions, made early in the planning process at CLF, were grounded in this implicit affirmation. The congregation sought an architect who would not only listen to the values and concerns of the congregation, but work with, and be responsive to, the building committee throughout the design process. On their part, the representatives of the congregation worked to ground their contributions on a theological, liturgical, and ecclesial foundation. This did not take the form of the pastor being the only, or even the chief, voice in such matters. Rather, it reflected the way in which the congregation had been formed by wise pastoral and lay leadership in the preceding years.

When a congregation looks at every important decision in terms of their mission and identity, it is natural for them to approach building a new building in the same way. Personal preferences and differences emerged, of course. After all, Lutherans know they are *simul justus et peccator* (both justified and sinners at the same time), and are reminded of that fact every Sunday. The good news is that, because together they were learning in liturgy “to do a redeemed world,” theological integrity regularly emerged as the deciding factor.

The second key decision was to seek a contractor who would welcome and make significant use of volunteer labor in the building process. The congregation hired a retired contractor from the congregation to be the volunteer coordinator. He would confer with the contractor to ascertain what needed to be done when, assess which of those things volunteers could do, assign volunteers to those tasks in terms of their competence and ability, and supervise their work. It turned out to be like an old fashioned barn raising, including meals for the workers. Ninety-five volunteers contributed 7,150 hours of labor, and were involved in almost every aspect of the building process. Of course, this lowered the cost considerably, but the

greater value to the congregation is the personal investment of the people, not only in terms of money but also with actual labor.

This kind of approach would not be wise, or even possible, in many situations. However, finding ways that the building and its furnishings can be the work of the people for the people is crucial if church architecture is to be liturgy. A carefully developed “client brief” is a good place to start, but that alone is not enough. How that brief is developed and the extent to which it is theologically and liturgically grounded are key. Either factor alone is insufficient. The process must involve the people in substantive ways or it does not reflect a communal rather than hierarchical understanding of the Church. It must be theologically and liturgically grounded or it becomes a “secular” rather than an ecclesial act. Thus, church architecture can itself be liturgy, the work of the people on behalf of the people.

2. As good liturgy, church architecture is contextual.

Custer Lutheran Fellowship’s site is 4 miles east of town. It adjoins the national forest on a gentle slope at the base of a mountain. Across the road is a mountain lake surrounded by trees and rocks against a mountain backdrop. The first building, which housed the worship space and a fellowship area, is one story with a pitched roof nestled against the rising mountain. A two story Christian education addition was built later.

It would be difficult to ignore the landscape there, but that does not mean that the building itself is automatically “a fragment of a larger whole” (cf. the principle of contextualism, 250). How the building sits on the site, honoring its natural environment is an important consideration (cf. 224). The view of the lake and mountains was a gift not to be disdained. Yet, as we will see, it was not the most important consideration. To be taken into account does not mean to be determinative.

The new addition, like the building already present, uses wood and stone, the natural building materials in the region. It makes use of the natural slope of the site to provide outside entrances on two levels. Its gabled roofs replicate the angularity of the mountains.

In planning for a new building that is good liturgy, planners must seek “to establish creative, harmonious relationship with the environment” (a goal of

Benedictine communities, cf. 290). That environment is not only natural, but also social and cultural.

This is a land of ranches and mines, cabin homes and mountain lodges. Its inhabitants are a part of the social fabric and history of the American West, but the presence of the Ogalala Lakota in the area is a reminder that it was not always so, and that multicultural concerns and relations cannot be ignored.

The resulting building has something in common with a mountain lodge---the supports of the entrance porticos are from the native Ponderosa pine, stripped, sanded and varnished. From the east, the building is somewhat reminiscent of the headframe building for a mine. Yet no one would mistake it for either a lodge or a mine.

As good liturgy, church architecture is contextual, but that does not mean that the context is the only, or the ultimate factor to be considered.

3. As good liturgy, church architecture has an “ecclesial identity” (288)

Early plans called for a large stone outside wall to face the road. Subtly embedded in the wall, one could discern a cross. In an ensuing discussion, a parishioner objected: “We want people to know this is a church. We don’t want anyone to miss the cross. It should be larger, more evident. We should have a large free-standing wooden cross in front of that stone wall. In fact, why not have all three crosses of Calvary there?”

I wasn’t at that meeting, but I heard the story in the next Sunday’s sermon when the pastor brought the importance of a theology of the cross for Lutherans to the fore. “Whatever is decided about the cross on the exterior of the building,” he said, “the cross is a central symbol of who we are and what we are about.” No one can miss those three crosses standing out from that stone wall. The central cross is by far the largest; it is the cross of Jesus Christ. But the crosses of the two thieves, one repentant, the other unrepentant, are there too. To those with eyes to see it proclaims: here is a community of followers of Jesus Christ, followers who are both justified and sinners, seeking always to live in the presence of the cross. This building has no steeple or bell tower, but those large crosses give the building an unmistakable ecclesial identity. (Cf. the affirmation that “new churches may

be built in new architectural styles provided they do not look like profane buildings” in the instructions on sacred art from the Congregation of the Holy Office on June 20, 1952, on 252.)

4. As good liturgy, church architecture fosters hospitality and a sense of community.

The main entry to the new building is between the two natural pine supports described above. Beyond the entry-way is the narthex---a large gathering space (31’ by 35’) with a high ceiling. Seasoltz notes the evangelical “sacralization of the Christian family” with its “redefinition of the church building as a proxy home.” (202-203) If the entry itself is reminiscent of lodge or cabin home in the area, however, the gathering space is more akin to a village square or town plaza.

Nikolai Grundtvig (a Danish Lutheran) “sought to respond to the human need for community” (198). The gathering space is hospitable space in which people can meet and be met. The high windows in the upper part of the gathering space give it an expansive feel, yet the whole is conducive to the development of community. Before and after the service, it hums with a kind of “holy hub-bub.” It is a room in which the “human needs for boundaries, intimacy and warmth” are addressed (227). .

On the wall opposite the new worship space, the gathering space is completely open to the old nave with its much lower ceiling which now functions as the “fellowship hall.” With its round tables, it is the location of coffee hour, church breakfasts, suppers, and other church activities.

Above this completely permeable boundary, on the upper wall facing the gathering space, are two large star quilts given to this congregation by St. Andrew and St. Michael Episcopal Churches, companion churches on the Ogalala Lakota reservation 90 miles away (not far, by Dakota standards!). Even within the village square, there is a reminder that the Church is bigger than this congregation, its mission larger than its own members.

In this gathering space can be found “a climate of hospitality, of welcome, in which people are present to one another as the body-persons they are, as members of the body of Christ, comfortable with one another, gathered together with one another, capable of seeing and hearing all that is enacted within the worshipping community.” (343-344)

5. As good liturgy, church architecture recognizes that the assembly is the primary celebrant of the liturgy (256)

Seasoltz writes:

In keeping with the medieval axiom *Sacramenta sunt propter hominess*, “Sacraments are for people,” we need to affirm the primacy of persons over things and to have faith in the fact that we are members of the body of Christ and temples of God’s own Holy Spirit.” (344)

Beyond a wall of windows and doors on the wall opposite the fellowship hall is the worship space, in shape, a trapezoid with a transverse emphasis. At the back of the seating area, it is some 65 feet wide, in the front, 47 feet wide. The ceiling is 25 feet high and the space is unbroken by any supports or columns. Careful attention has been given to the close relationship between the congregation, the Lord’s Table, and the place where the Word is proclaimed (cf. 266).

The “chancel” is only one step above the rest of the room. The impression is not of an auditorium (cf. 201), but rather a “participa-torium” (my invented term!) that focuses on the Lord’s Table (cf. 256). The seating is arranged in a slightly curved fashion, so that from any seat one is aware of being a part of the congregation. The Lord’s Table and the large cross above it form the central focal point, but one is always aware that others are also in the congregation—not just because one sees the backs of their heads, but rather the front of their faces. Yet because they are not “behind” the Lord’s Table, that recognition is not visually distracting.

The design of the space affirms the role of members of the assembly as participant celebrants of the liturgy and encourages and enhances that participation.

6. As good liturgy, church architecture provides “a spatial envelope for the altar which is Christ” (245)

The Danish Lutheran Nikolai Grundtvig was convinced that “the incarnate Lord Jesus was encountered in baptism and the Lord’s Supper” (198). Thus, font and table are primary foci for the worshipping community.

The baptismal font stands at the entrance to the worship space. It is “meant to remind each person entering the church of that first sacramental encounter brought about by the saving waters of rebirth” (274). The font was designed and crafted by a member of the congregation. Rather than the “tomb and womb” symbolism of many fonts, it stands as a “well of living waters.” Like a village well, the community gathers around it to celebrate the water of life. Constructed of native wood and stone, the font is 40 inches high with a square receptacle for water 53 inches square. Water bubbles up from the stones within it, running down one side. The congregation is not yet comfortable with having a baptism take place behind them, but as they are invited to stand and turn toward the font, it is hoped this discomfort may lessen.

An aisle leads directly from the font to the table. This arrangement recognizes that “from the life-giving waters of the font, Christian pilgrims respond to God’s invitation and process to the altar and beyond, ready to serve not only God but also God’s people and the world beyond the walls” (277, cf. Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist, Milwaukee, Wisconsin).

7. Furnishing and works of art in the church are to assist the liturgy and worship of the congregation. (252)

The approach taken by CLF to furnishings for its new worship space reframes an affirmation of the Arts and Crafts school of the nineteenth century by insisting that liturgical art should be not only for the people but by the people (cf. William Morris, 191).

There is a need to “identify psychologically and physically with a local place” taking into account its “regional character” (cf. 245). This is a region of trees and rocks. It is also a place where people often choose to do their own work in constructing and furnishing their homes or to make use of local crafts and artisans to provide that for them. Lutherans could invoke Nikolai Grundtvig yet again, for he “successfully integrated the products of the folk arts and crafts into the worship of the people by incorporating their weavings and carvings into the worship space” (198).

The Lord’s Table and pulpit, as well as the font, were crafted by local artists. So are the prayer rail and the cross above the Lord’s Table. All are made from local pine, stripped, sanded (but not lathed into perfect roundness), and varnished. The natural lines are very evident, so there is no secret that they

are made of the trunks and limbs of trees. The connection with the creation is inescapable.

The central wall behind the Lord's Table is made of stone. On the walls to the right and left of that focal center hang banners (4' by 12') which change according to the season. They, too, are crafted by members of the congregation. They make use of simple but clear symbols and images, avoiding "visual noise" and enhancing, rather than competing with, the central focal point.

The furnishings are characterized by "thoughtfulness, grace and poetry" (cf. discussion of Alvar Aalto, 247). Those who designed and furnished CLF have "striven for grace of line, play of light and shadow, discretion of adornment and beauty in color and texture" (as in the Cathedral of Our Lady of Angels, Los Angeles, California, 284-285).

These furnishings assist the liturgy and worship of the congregation. As Seasoltz reminds us: "It is the actual experience of worshipers and ministers that determines the effectiveness of a church building." (284)

8. Church architecture is language and both expresses and forms the faith of the community. (cf. 249)

A crucial question that faced the building planners was which direction the worship space should face, and what view it should frame. A natural possibility was to frame the view of lake and mountains with which the site was graced. The planners did not want to ignore that gift. However, they also recognized the danger (especially in that area of great natural beauty) for one to worship natural beauty itself, letting it become an idol rather than an icon of the presence of God. The result of their deliberations was the decision to have a wall of windows along one side with a view of the lake and mountains, but to face the worship space with an inset in the middle of the front wall, in front of which a large wooden cross would be hung. On each side of this 15 X 17 foot inset are narrow windows perpendicular to the wall but screened from the congregation's direct view by the walls on either side. Thus, natural light can shine on the cross, but one is not confronted with a distracting view. In this way, the design of the worship space affirms that "God is not only immanent in creation but transcendent as well." (33)

The “light from beyond” is an implicit affirmation of transcendence “capable of bearing the weight of mystery, reverence and awe that are essential characteristics of sound liturgical experience” (344). With the large cross hanging front and center, this focal point provides an ongoing affirmation of “both the basic goodness of creation and the ongoing need for redemption in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.” (33) The exterior stone wall behind this is not only a point of contact with creation, but also a reminder of the Rock that is Christ (I Cor. 10:4), as well as the stability and strength that points to God.

While this worship space is, in one sense, set apart from the world, the congregation is invited back into the world through the windows, thus challenging “people to involve themselves in both the ongoing creation of the universe and the critical transformation of the world.” (34)

Within this space focused on both cross and creation are the three key furnishings: table, font, and pulpit. Each of them provides a space “in which the Christian assembly celebrates and encounters the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.” (345) It is significant that the ambo or pulpit is the least striking of the three. There is little danger in a Protestant church, let alone a Lutheran one, of the Word not being a central part of worship. The Word carries its own weight in the liturgical experience of the congregation; the furniture doesn’t have to do it. Worshippers need to be reminded, however, by font and table, that baptismal and eucharistic spirituality are as important as the sacrament of the Word for Lutherans. All three celebrate and incarnate the paschal mystery.

In this worship space, the congregation encounters God as “one who is above all active in history and present in creation, even in its experience of suffering and death.” (31) Such is the language of the architecture and furnishings that both express and form the faith of the community.

9. As good liturgy, the facets of the building and its furnishings interact to form a coherent whole.

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At Custer Lutheran Fellowship, the natural setting, the gathering place, the fellowship hall and kitchen, and the classrooms are all important parts of the whole. Their activities and functions flow into and out of the space where the community gathers to break bread together, to baptize and hear the Word, to be sent forth in ministry and mission. As Seasoltz writes;

A building is not a mere container housing functions; it is also an expressive presence that is dynamic in the environment. It both anchors people in place and also gives them a sense of mobility. . . . They have their roots in the past, relate to the present and reach out to the future.” (250)

The building is a spatial envelope for the body of Christ as it celebrates and incarnates the paschal mystery. Just as liturgy when spoken, acted, and sung in ways that detract from the paschal mystery can be judged to be less than it could be, so it is with the liturgy of space. When all things work together, the matrix provides an arena in which God’s Word to us and our words before God have greater significance because of our surroundings.. At CLF, I experience “a space of exceptional beauty . . . capable of revealing God as mysteriously transcendent but also warmly immanent in wood and stone, and above all in the community.” (310, the description is of the Abbey at New Melleray, Iowa)

For me, the summary affirmation of the book is Kevin Seasoltz’s assertion that “an attractive beauty in all that is said and done, used or observed is the best way to facilitate the experience of mystery, for God is not only goodness and truth; God is also beauty.” (344)

10. Liturgical space is a place of grace.

A basic question running through these reflections is: “can the environment be anything less than a vehicle to meet the Lord and to encounter one another?” (*Environment and Art in Catholic Worship* by the American Bishops Committee on the Liturgy, quoted on 347). Hidden beneath that question, however, is another: can the building and its furnishings be something more than a vehicle for us to meet God?

An affirmation from another starting point is: God comes to us where we worship. It is God’s initiative, God’s self-revelation. As such, liturgical space is a place of grace. This is an important reminder, lest the building and its furnishings become an idol rather than an icon. “An idol is something that simply reflects our own gaze, whereas an icon points our sight beyond ourselves to something we cannot master.” (27, appropriating the distinctions of Jean-Luc Marion).

Our attention to the setting in which we worship often focuses on *what we gaze upon*. A transformation of that perspective comes when we acknowledge that through the icon *we are being gazed upon*. God also comes in simple things such as mangers, which we might not judge as beautiful at all. Or even more to the point, in ugly repellant things like a cross. We may make the manger into an art object; we may gild the cross and make it “beautiful.” Before all that, however, when God was first manifest in them and on them, they were not beautiful.

God is not constrained to come to us only where we think the beauty of the setting is worthy of God. In the storefront church, the unadorned chapel, the dingy room, history tells us, people have found God coming to them.

We approach this truth with fear and trembling. Once again, God has a way of turning things upside down for us. The God who came and comes in manger, cross and tomb is worthy of the best we have to offer, and beauty is part of that best. Beautiful buildings and furnishings do not constrain God to hear us, nor are they automatic vehicles in which we will always meet God. But they can grasp us from beyond ourselves, opening us to the mystery of God’s presence.

Invited or uninvited, we dare to say, God is present. When God comes to us, addressing us through beautiful art and architecture, word and song, silence and sound, perhaps then, with the prompting of the Holy Spirit, we may learn to see God in the mangers, crosses, and tombs of our world and be enabled to receive and share in God’s ongoing work of transformation and renewal. In our thinking, our building, our crafting, and our doing, we are then able to say: To God alone be the glory.

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