

REFLECTION for St. Cecilia's, Ames (7/12-13/03)

The readings for today's liturgy, especially the second reading and the Gospel reiterate many key aspects of the foundation of our faith. We are redeemed, forgiven, blest and sent as God's chosen people - a holy people marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul says that "In Christ we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of God's grace lavished on us ... God has made known to us the mystery of the divine will set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time."

And this plan is not one just for our individual spiritual journey, but one that is to be proclaimed by and shared with others. Each time we come together as the People of God we listen to and are nourished by God's word; we bless and give thanks for the gifts of the earth, of each other and of God's abundant goodness. We gather at the table to receive Christ's body and blood, and then are sent forth to proclaim and live the Gospel.

So how does the Living Church relate to the building in which we gather to pray, to receive the sacraments and to celebrate the eucharist? In the bishops' document, Built of Living Stones, which is the official guidelines for Catholic art, architecture and worship in the United States, the bishops' state that "The church is the proper place for the liturgical prayer of the parish community, especially the celebration of the Eucharist on Sunday. It is also the privileged place for adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and reservation of the Eucharist for Communion for the sick. Churches are never 'simply gathering spaces but signify and make visible the Church living in [a particular] place, the dwelling of God' among us, now 'reconciled and united in Christ.' As such, the building itself becomes 'a sign of the pilgrim Church on earth and reflects the Church

dwelling in heaven.' Every church building is a gathering place for the assembly, a resting place, a place of encounter with God, as well as a point of departure on the Church's unfinished journey toward the reign of God."

As God's family we are called in the words of the documents of Vatican II to "full, active and conscious participation" in the liturgical life of the Church. We come to liturgy not as passive spectators but as active participants. To be participants requires different kinds and arrangements of space than to be spectators.

If we think in terms of our family gatherings it may give us some insights to our gathering as God's family. When we celebrate in our biological families there is usually a gathering from many directions and a time of greeting, of listening to what has happened in our lives and a re-connecting, a coming together, as one extended family. This usually takes place in a family room or a living room. From there we then move into a dining area to share a meal. Everyone gathers closely around a common table to be nourished not only by food, but also by conversation and the sharing of family history and stories. We are one family, celebrating one common meal. And when the celebration is ended, we go our separate ways different from when we came because of all that we have shared.

So too is the case when we gather as God's family. We come from different directions, different experiences during the week, and we need to re-connect with each other, to become mindful of the common bond we share as God's people. The gathering space of a church is one place where this activity takes place. It is a space that physically draws us together as we are greeted and greet one another and become one as we prepare to celebrate Eucharist. The gathering space serves not only those who are members of the

parish community, but should also be a place of welcome for those who are new to the parish and of invitation to those who are searching for a faith community to join. It is also the place that sends us forth as a community after we have celebrated.

It is through our dying and rising in the waters of baptism that we become members of the church. Since Vatican II the revival of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults has become an important part of a parish's liturgical life and the baptizing of adults calls for different types of fonts than those used for infant baptism. Study of baptism in the early church as well as types of font used throughout church history can give us many insights into the design and placement of a font. Each time we enter the church, we are invited to renew our baptismal promises by blessing ourselves with baptismal water, and to renew our commitment to die and rise with Christ in our daily lives. By placing the baptismal font near the entrance of the worship area we can more easily do this. Having the font in this location also allows for the full celebration of the funeral rite whereby the body is blessed with the waters of baptism one last time.

As we gather together, we hear the word of God proclaimed and we respond with word and song. We ask God to hear our petitions and we bring gifts of bread, wine and alms. As one family we gather around the table to pray and to receive the Body and Blood of Christ. This means that we must be able to hear, see, participate and be connected with others in our parish family during Eucharist. Eucharist is a time of communal not private prayer. How we are seated, how far we are from the ambo and altar, to what extent we have a physical connection with others who are present, and how much we participate all affect our celebration of Eucharist. As we design or redesign sacred spaces these are all very important considerations to be addressed, and the bishops' document gives us both

specific and general guidelines in doing this, as do the guidelines of the archdiocese of Dubuque which spell out in more detail some of the general norms of the document.

As your parish grows, your spatial needs for liturgy and building community are changing. The renovation and expansion project that you as a parish are now exploring is being done so that as your numbers increase you can continue to celebrate Eucharist and the sacraments in a full, active and conscious manner, and then carry forth Christ's message of love and compassion as did the apostles in today's gospel.

As we continue to discern and discuss plans for your church building, the most important thing is that the process be one of growth in understanding and faith and that your parish community is strengthened as the People of God. Each person in the parish has a piece of wisdom that needs to be shared and heard and thus participation in the discernment process is essential. If we study, pray and work together we will make good decisions and create a space that will serve this parish for many years to come. It will be a sacred space in which the sacraments and rituals of the Catholic Church can be fully celebrated and which also provides appropriate areas for private prayer and devotion. It will be a space which will be a sign to all who drive by that this is a sacred place where God dwells and where sacred people come to worship, to be healed and forgiven, and to be nourished by God's word and sacrament and in turn nourish others. This is the invitation and challenge set forth in our readings today. Let us ask the Spirit to guide us in this sacred journey so that with Paul we may proclaim ``that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of God's glory."