

CHURCH FURNISHINGS

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Flower stands

The increased interest in floral art on the one hand and the increased professionalism and business acumen of florists on the other have greatly encouraged the provision of flowers in churches and especially in the sanctuary. Stands for flowers are now readily available 'off the peg' and are frequently the gift of modest benefactors. The style and quality of such artefacts will be discussed later.

The important point for this part of the chapter is the placing of such items. In general floral art should be subject to the same discipline as other arts: it should not obtrude. It is there in an ancillary capacity, like music, architecture, stained glass and the rest. Flowers and foliage have been the traditional inspiration of carving and decoration in churches and on church furnishings, but if a holy table is so encrusted with carving as to be primarily a show-piece of craftsmanship and only incidentally a flat surface which can serve as a table then the decoration, for all its splendour, is out of place. So if flower stands and what is placed on them are such as to compete for pride of place and importance with table and pulpit, indeed steal the sanctuary limelight, they do the Church and its liturgy a disservice.

Flowers are there to enhance the two focal points of the sanctuary, not to obscure them. Even at a wedding, where current fashion seems to take vast expenditure on flowers as a matter of course, the Church must retain the right to keep its ecclesiastical and liturgical geography clearly discernible, the lineaments of the sanctuary unobscured and their witness unimpaired. A wedding service is not an occasion for creating a floral idyll to be the space for a bit of matrimonial theatre. On the contrary, the church as Church is the space.

The couple and their friends, whether they are formally the Church or simply associated with the Church on this occasion, identify with the

Church and the Church gives thanks to God for the gift of marriage to humanity and for the providence which has brought the couple together. The Church also proclaims at a wedding service that the relationship of husband and wife, like every other relationship, can be enhanced if Christ is in it. Even if the pulpit is not used on these occasions that proclamation is a part of or a deduction from that word of God to which the pulpit in a church itself bears witness. Likewise it is Christian belief that all relationships find their true fulfilment in that most intimate identification with Christ and therefore with one another which is possible in the sacrament of Holy Communion, the action of which is centred on the table. That remains Christian faith, even if at any particular wedding the couple merely approach the table to kneel at its steps.

The flowers and their stands must be so arranged as to point up and enhance the silent witness of the sanctuary's principal furnishings, not to replace it with a romantic gush.

The flowers bear witness in their way to the glory of God and the beauty of his creation, 'for there is a language of flowers'. But the Church which speaks of the glory of creation speaks most authentically when it proclaims God versatile and inventive in creation and equally versatile and inventive in grace and salvation.

The lectern

A lectern is a useful piece of furniture, especially if it is not too heavy and can be easily moved. Whether or not it should be present permanently in the sanctuary is a real question. In many churches in Scotland it is scarcely ever used and simply adds to the general clutter. Where it is used for the reading of scripture its distinction from the pulpit, especially its lesser height and more modest appearance, has a weakening effect on the whole visual impact of the sanctuary and may represent a distortion of the silent witness of its principal furnishings. Why should the place for the reading of the word be two or three or

more feet lower than the place for the preaching of the word? The reading of scripture may have been entrusted to lectors from earliest times, and they may have been a 'minor order', but there can be little doubt that the importance of their service was appreciated. The ambo that was provided for them was wheeled out to give greater proximity to the worshippers: the sermon was preached from a sitting position behind the table until, around the fourth century, the complaint was heard that preaching from behind a distant table was too much of a strain on the preacher's voice in the larger basilicas. The preacher then came forward to preach from the platform from which the scriptures were read.

The reader of scripture today may sometimes be someone other than an ordained minister but, as in early centuries, the ecclesiastical status of the reader is not the important thing; the important thing is the function performed. The importance of the function sadly is not always appreciated. Readers could learn from the reply of a professional actor to an invitation to read lessons in a certain Aberdeen church. Would he be able to have the lessons in time to give himself three or four hours for preparation? He did not intend to memorize them! For the reading of scripture the place also deserves consideration. More and more writers, not least Roman Catholic writers (with Vatican Council encouragement) are stating plainly that careful consideration of the matter points to the desirability of the word's being read and preached from the same place. Among other things it underlines the mutual need of the word read and the word preached.

The prayer desk

The principal furnishings of a sanctuary are pulpit and table: we are concerned with a ministry of word and sacrament. Let it be assumed that the ministry of the word, reading of scripture and preaching, is concentrated in the pulpit: we have dispensed with a lectern. We have therefore two focal points in the sanctuary in some sort of relationship

to one another. Do we need anything else? *The Book of Common Order* (1979) and *The Church Hymnary: Third Edition* both provided orders for morning worship and both recognized three main parts in the order: APPROACH TO GOD; THE WORD OF GOD; RESPONSE TO THE WORD OF GOD. Both spoke of the eucharistic pattern of worship even where Holy Communion is not celebrated.

The section APPROACH TO GOD includes praise; call to prayer; prayers of approach, confession, absolution, supplication etc. This part, coming before the beginning of the action proper in the reading of scripture, seems to ask for a minister identified spatially with his people in an intermediate place, not addressing them, facing ecclesiastically north or south. It should be a modest place, at the sanctuary's edge, a place where the minister will kneel and the desk will be at the appropriate height. The 'word function' is thereby enhanced, because this approach, this preparation, has been made. The climbing of steps into a pulpit is now for the purpose for which the pulpit was intended. Now there is proper eye contact. Now there is proclamation, the congregation begins to be addressed with a new intensity.

The minister may return to the prayer desk to make prayers of intercession before going to the table, unless intercessions are to be made along with thanksgiving at the table. A prayer desk in the position recommended seems particularly appropriate for biddings, intimations and explanations of any part of worship, if such be required.

The font

There is no *one* right place for the font in a church any more than there is any one right plan for the church building itself. There is no *one* enlightened, early church practice to be restored but only a history of development and a multiplicity of models. For some the Reformed insistence that baptism be in the face of the congregation will be guideline sufficient and without further question they will place the font in the sanctuary.

While, however, the guideline need not be questioned, the location of the font certainly should. The vast theological interest in baptism in our day, the liturgies rich in baptismal images, the prominent and promising part baptism plays in the ecumenical debate, the tightening of Church law anent baptism in our own Church - all of these have restored a dignity and significance to the sacrament of baptism which deserves to be expressed visually and spatially.

In many churches in Scotland the visitor could scarcely doubt the importance of preaching, so impressive is the pulpit and so prominent is its position. In others the lines of the building may draw the eye primarily to the table. The sacrament of baptism is of such fundamental importance that the font deserves to be similarly impressive. But if this is to be done in the sanctuary surely it will detract from the two liturgically monumental furnishings of the area - the table and the pulpit. Their relationship can be readily represented and registered. There may be also liturgical progression and regular movement from one to the other Sunday by Sunday to drive the point home. It is questionable whether there is any one theological relationship between font and table or between font and pulpit which is so simple and obvious as to permit of being represented spatially. Certainly there is nothing as simple as the message conveyed by the font at the west end that baptism is entrance on the Christian life.

This model has much to commend it, provided space enough is afforded for an adequate amount of baptismal symbolism. Such an arrangement depends of course either on the congregational seating permitting the worshippers to turn 180 degrees comfortably or alternatively on the congregation's leaving their seats to gather round the font. The latter may require a large space. Given that for many congregations movement out of pews (except to go home) would be troublesome this may not be popular or even possible. Spatially, however, it is a model which makes sense.

It may be equally satisfactory to give the font its own space, its own architectural setting, with accompanying window or wall hanging or

other representation of baptismal motifs, in an area north or south of the sanctuary or of the approach to it, provided the sight lines are reasonably good. The fact that the odd person cannot see the affusion because of a pillar in the way scarcely invalidates this solution. Such a baptistry may indeed be the preferable way of creating that sacrum which truly befits the font and more particularly the sacrament with which it is associated.

The pulpit and the table

The decision to leave discussion of pulpit and table to this point was taken in the belief that points raised in discussion of other furnishings would contribute cumulatively towards identifying the really important things that had to be said about pulpit and table. The reason for treating these two together under one heading is that it is the relationship of the two that presents the biggest challenge both to those privileged to build a new church and to those given the opportunity to effect some reordering within existing churches.

The picture that has emerged from the preceding sections is of a sanctuary having no font in it, no lectern in it, only a pulpit, a table, a prayer desk at its outer edge and a discreet flower stand or stands. Flowers will not be on the table: rather they will be part of the adornment of the setting along with lighting and fabric. Such a simplification of furnishings reads clearly word and sacrament. Such an arrangement reflects simple obedience to two dominical commands: “Go ye therefore and teach all nations ... teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you” and “Do this in remembrance of me”.

So in the sanctuary there is a pulpit and a table and they bear faithful witness to the principal functions around which all other constituents of regular worship gather. This table is a table and not an altar, though it is a place where the overtones of sacrifice will often be heard - our sacrifice of prayer and praise: of ourselves or of our gifts, always in

response to the one true, pure, immortal sacrifice. It is pre-eminently a table, though it should not be a table at which the celebrant or celebrant and elders sit. Symbolically all sit at this table. The celebrant stands. Chairs immediately behind the table may blur the symbolism. If space permits they should be set considerably further back. In a chancel or in an apse they may indeed be sedilia on the outer edge. The celebrant can easily walk a few paces to take the elements to elders or elders standing to right and to left may perform the task. Where space does not permit, a bench on which the celebrant may sit, say during the distribution of the elements, is preferable. The 'presidential' chair belongs in a different scenario: in the early Church, as we saw above, it was the place from which came preaching and teaching and the preacher sat in it to preach. The chair was made to look important because the function was important. Now that that function is performed in a pulpit, the 'presidential' chair is confusing and tends to lead us into the personal status trap, which is to be avoided.

Establishing a visual and spatial relationship between pulpit and table is, however, the greater problem to be faced. It is particularly acute in some inherited situations. The mediaeval cathedral makes marvellous architectural provision for the table but may have a pulpit as merely an appendage to a pillar, with no architectural setting of its own. The simpler chancelled church may bring the pulpit into somewhat closer relationship to the table but the pulpit may still require embellishment - a tester, antependium, superimposed liturgical colours, lighting etc. - to give it any kind of equivalence of importance with the table.

Time and again the situation will be reversed: the pulpit will dominate architecturally. The table below will have to be rescued from a jungle of chairs and other items, be given space, perhaps be covered with a rich cloth. An organ console may have to be removed so that the table may be seen properly by the congregation!

These matters deserve to be given our best thought. Theological effort is required certainly in looking into the implications of the faith for liturgy and for liturgical space. But liturgy and the doing of it involve

more than precision of rationality and criticism. Liturgy is the celebration of the mystery of Christ: it will express that in its own way, in an evocative, poetic, symbolic way. We are concerned here more with art than with science, and the best art, certainly in the service of the church and the faith, points beyond itself to eternal truth. The disposition of church furnishings is part of that distinctive endeavour.

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