

A Note on a Building

A building is a reflection of the people who use it and the functions it serves for its people. The new church building of the Parish of Saint Edward the Confessor is no different. This building came to be what it is and what it can yet be as a result of our past, our present and the future we see as a community.

Our old church stood and served our community for nearly 111 years. It reflected a style and a form of expression which was dominant for 311 years when the building was built and which we began to see as permanent. Our building and the art with which we decorated it emphasized adoration as a form of worship: adoration of the Eucharist, of the Sacred Heart, of the Blessed Mother, veneration of the Saints and a myriad of special prayers. We celebrate our faith even today in a language and style which is dictated in large measure by our traditions. Our emphasis, however, is changing to a worship which focuses on the present, on the sharing of our lives with one another, on the coming of the Lord into our presence and on the place of religion in our daily lives.

Our fore fathers expressed their faith in the old Saint Edward's church, using a style and form taken from their traditions. Yet from the time the original church of this parish was dedicated, the emphasis in worship which led to its form, style and decoration was slowly being challenged and replaced by a new focus. Through the years, a new understanding was developed, ultimately to be set down by the Church Fathers at the Second Vatican Council. The Council brought a new way of looking at and understanding our traditions and a new emphasis which was soon translated into changes in the way we worship. These changes continue, and will be reflected in changes within us, the church of Saint Edward, for some time to come.

We cannot be sure of what tomorrow holds in the face of such changes, yet we must step out of our old building, the old shell which has helped to define us in times past, and to build a new one. This time, in addition to building upon our traditions, we build toward a vision. Our vision of the future, our dream of what we want to be, is built out of the fabric of our past as surely as the old church was, yet like most dreams, it is subject to change and interpretation.

Our view of worship is changing from an individual adoration of the Blessed Sacrament to a community-centered sharing of the experience of God's presence among us. With this new image of what we are doing, it becomes important that we be able to see each other, to experience what worship means to those around us. To express this new value, we arrange the seating so that we can see each other as well as the priest at the altar. Our architect has extended this value into the shape of the building, giving us a curved space. In choosing this semi-circular seating pattern, of course, we also minimize the distance from the altar to the farthest seat. With nearly twice the number of seats we had in the old church, the number of rows of seats is less in the new church.

If worship is a community activity, then it should not end abruptly with a closing song, nor should we begin without the opportunity to welcome each other. To create an opportunity to meet and greet our fellow worshipers, a large narthex was created and extended into the worship space itself. On the outside of the building, a plaza is included in the design as yet another place for people to gather. Provision has been made by the architect to extend this concept in a third direction, into the hall which we may choose to build to the right of the main entrance in years to come.

The role of music, especially choral music, in Catholic worship has changed considerably in the years since the original church was built. An emphasis on the choir as a performing body which prevailed in past years has been replaced by an emphasis on the choir as the leaders of congregational song. Song is one of the best ways we have of expressing our emotional side, and thus forms an integral part of prayer. If the choir leads us in sung prayer, they should be with us, not set apart. This view is expressed architecturally by placing the choir within the congregation, where they and their director can be seen by all.

Sunday Mass, of course, is not the whole life of the parish. At our daily liturgies we have a much smaller congregation. The large church, which fosters a sense of togetherness which we need for worship in a large group, would be destructive to the same feelings in a smaller group. To accommodate small groups at worship, whether for daily Mass or for small weddings and funerals, we included in the design a small chapel. This chapel also serves as the place of repose of the Blessed Sacrament, a setting which we hope will encourage more of the parish to take the time for a visit. We have not, after all, in any way diminished the importance of the Eucharist in our lives.

Other sacraments will be celebrated in our community as well. Two which have long suffered limitations in our old building are Baptism and the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Reconciliation, which we used to call Confession or Penance, has obviously undergone a change of name. Along with the new name, however, comes an important new understanding of its meaning and the way in which it should be celebrated. And celebrated is the right word, for as the Lord celebrates our return to Him, we should celebrate His forgiveness, His unbounded love in our lives. To make a place for this to happen, a place where matters of heart and soul can be addressed, two reconciliation chapels have been included in the building.

While we seem to have a new understanding of the sacrament of forgiveness and repentance, the celebration of acceptance into the worshipping community, Baptism, seems not yet to have been fully redefined. We find ourselves knowing what the values are which we want to express, but not knowing enough to commit ourselves to bricks and mortar. What we have done is to provide a place near the entrance to the church, at the head of the broad aisle, with a drain and a water supply. Here we hope to place a baptismal font, where it will serve to remind each of us

of our own baptism and where it can be used to perform the sacrament of entrance into the community with the whole congregation present. Until we can determine whether to build for the baptism of infants, the age at which we have been baptizing in recent years, or for children, or even possibly for adults, we will leave this part of our church unfinished.

Practical considerations also play a part in the design of a building. In this age, energy costs are important. We built the building into the hill to control heat loss and gave it glass to face the sun when we will use the building most. This allows the sun to help with the heating bill. To avoid the expense of air conditioning, we asked the architect to include built in exhaust fans and cross ventilation. Costs too have kept the size of the office spaces below what we really need. We hope that we will be able to remedy this in the future.

Artistic values are reflected in the design as well. The curvature of our preferred seating plan was reflected in the curved wall of the building. The slope of the hillside became a similarly sloped roofline. Even necessities turned into things of beauty, as an emergency exit became the basis for a cantilevered stairway along the East wall of the worship space. The artistic values of the old church have also been preserved where we could. The tabernacle and wooden altar, which will eventually grace the chapel, and the bell which calls us to worship and rings out our joy have been brought with us. In some cases, however, we could not justify bringing an object. The most disheartening of such instances has been the windows of the old church. It was with great reluctance and after many hours of discussion that we accepted the advice of our consultants that the stained glass in the old church could not properly be used in the new building and still maintain consistent artistic values.

All is not perfect in our new building, however. As in any design effort, we have had to make some hard compromises. The artistically valuable curved wall is causing some acoustic problems. The sloped ceiling is causing other sound problems because it slopes the "wrong" way. The heat of the sun, which we will enjoy so much in the winter, creates a light control problem which we must come to terms with. And on it goes. But we have time to work out solutions to these and a myriad of other slight imperfections in what we have built so far.

We have time. Just as constancy was to be expected when the old Saint Edward's was built, our time is one in which change, evolution and the cyclic seasons of our celebrations are the rule. It may seem strange to end this note about a building by talking about change, but that is what must be done. We are a dynamic people, a people undergoing renewal, growth and change. This is reflected in our building too: we used movable seating and several other design features just to provide flexibility, so that the building can change to meet our many needs, from Sunday Mass to the teaching of our faith to our children. In many ways the church was left unfinished so that it can change and evolve with time. Just as the decoration of our new church was left unfinished, we are an unfinished people, evolving into a new and different Parish of Saint Edward the Confessor. As we

pause to dedicate this church, this building, let us not forget that we also came to dedicate a human church, the people of the Parish of Saint Edward. Let us not forget that the new church building serves the people who are, first and above all else, the church which Jesus Christ built.