

Reflecting Heaven

Notes on the OLMC Sanctuary Renovation

Part 14: The Ambo

The Roman Catholic liturgy is full of words obscure to the uninitiated, and in fact to many long-time Catholics: thurible, lavabo; ciborium, censer, corporal, chasuble. The auto-correct on my phone tries desperately to “correct” these spellings when I type them. As with so many things in the Catholic liturgy, even spellings are so other-worldly that they remain unrecognized by the worldly mind.

One of the more colorful-yet-succinct of these specialized appellations is the “ambo,” which my spell-checker stubbornly corrects to “Rambo.” So stubbornly, in fact, that it won’t even allow me to add “Ambo” to my dictionary. Apparently, and sadly, Sylvester Stallone’s character is more readily recognized in our post-modern culture than the place for proclamation of God’s Word.



So what is the ambo, and how is it used? Isn’t it just the same as a lectern, a podium, or a pulpit? Well, no; each of these is actually different:

- *Lectern*: a tall stand with a book holder at which someone stands to read or speak.
- *Podium*: a raised platform on which a person stands to be better seen or heard; same as a *rostrum*

- *Pulpit*: a raised podium or lectern from which a preacher delivers a sermon
- *Ambo*: the raised, fixed, noble, substantial place from which the Word of God is proclaimed in the liturgy.

Thus, the ambo is distinct from the others in both design and purpose. A lectern may be portable, as has been our temporary “ambo” during the renovation. But the Church stresses that the ambo must be fixed and unmovable. Why? Because the Church makes a bold claim about what actually happens during the Liturgy of the Word: “[W]hen the Sacred Scriptures are read in the Church, God himself speaks to his people, and Christ, present in his word, proclaims the Gospel” (GIRM §29). If Christ himself is present in the Word, the ambo becomes a symbol for Christ – strong and stable in the midst of His people, just as the altar, as a symbol of Christ, is also fixed to the floor, solid as a rock.

What about “noble,” a word that surfaces frequently in the Church’s liturgical documents; what does that mean? It certainly means high-quality and substantial, but ultimately it comes from the same Latin root as “knowable.” That is, a noble object or material in church architecture reveals by its nature and design the heavenly realities it represents (thus the title of this series of articles: “Reflecting Heaven”).

In an ambo, this is manifested in several ways. First, the material used should be high quality and genuine, and it should reflect the ambo’s relationship with the altar. Our new ambo, as the old one, will be built of the same white marble used for the altar (see article 10 in this series). Thus, the connection is clear that the Liturgy of the

Word is intimately connected with and leads to the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Indeed, the ambo is properly seen as the “Table of the Word,” while the altar becomes the “Table of the Eucharist.”

Second, the placement of the ambo is important. It must be raised and visible.

Ambos in the early Church were often elevated far above the floor, approached by steps. In the days before amplification, this served both a visual and acoustic purpose. But it was also symbolic.



Ambo at Aachen Cathedral

Throughout Scripture, God often chooses a mountaintop as the place of interaction with his people: Moses on Mt. Sinai, the Temple on Mt. Moriah, the Transfiguration on Mt. Tabor, etc. And Jesus himself delivered the Sermon on the Mount and went to the mountain to pray. Less often noticed, however, is that the very first proclaimer of the good news of the Resurrection, the angel at the tomb, announced that news while sitting atop the very stone that had sealed the tomb (Matthew 28:2). The very first ambo, then, was the repurposed door of Christ’s tomb, and the space under a raised ambo commonly became seen as representing the empty tomb.

Ambos were used in the early church, from at least the 4th century until they started to fade in the 13th century or so. After the Council of Trent they completely fell out of use, since the Scripture in the old Tridentine Rite of the Mass was read quietly by the priest at the altar, not proclaimed aloud to the people. Ambos were replaced for centuries by pulpits, used only for preaching about the

Word, but not for proclaiming the Word itself. When the 2nd Vatican Council (1962-65) emphasized and restored the value of proclaiming God’s word aloud at Mass, the ambo was also restored.

It is important to note that the word of God is *proclaimed* at Mass; we don’t all just sit and read it silently to ourselves. The spoken Word of God is creative (“Let there be light, and there was light.”); it is “living and effective;” it is dynamic; it makes things happen! When we hear the Word at Mass, we must to be open to the Word’s power to fundamentally change us!

“The dignity of the Word of God requires that in the church there 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.” (General Instruction of the Roman Missal §309)

What about our new OLMC ambo? It will look quite similar to our former ambo, with white marble and columns matching the altar. It will be noble, substantial, and clearly not the place to announce a pancake breakfast, but the place to proclaim the Good News. Shorter lectors and children will be happy to know it will have fold-down steps to accommodate those of small stature.

A striking change that will take some getting used to will be that the ambo will switch sides of the sanctuary; it will now be on your right as you view it. This is rare in Catholic churches, but not unheard of. Most ambos are to your left, because that used to be the “Gospel side” in the pre-Vatican 2 Mass. However, the liturgy documents do not specify one side over the other.

In short, the ambo is a major means by which we encounter the living Christ in the liturgy and nurture our relationship with him. May our ears be opened to hear and heed his holy Word from the ambo!

For an excellent article on the ambo, see <https://adoremus.org/2016/11/14/ambo-launch-platform-word/>