

Environment for Catholic Worship

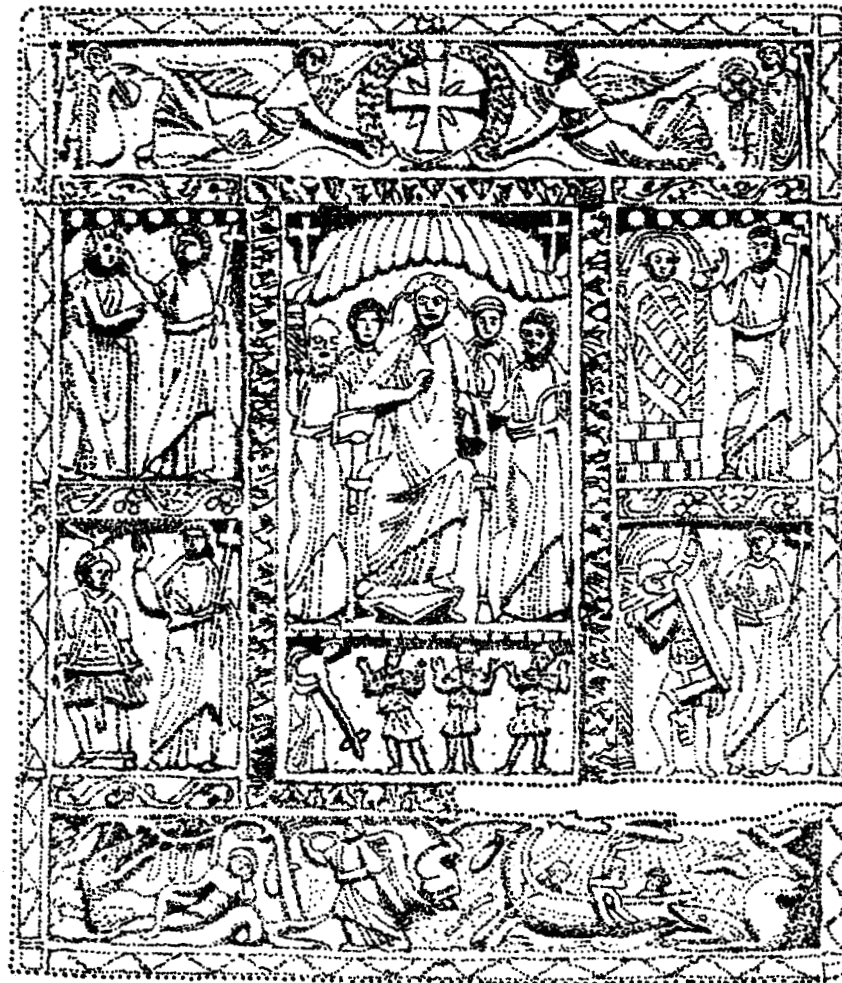
Part 3

The Ambo

“Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” (Luke 24:32) With these words, the two disciples who had been walking on the road to Emmaus described to themselves in amazement how a stranger who mysteriously appeared to them made sense of the familiar stories of their people’s history. The identity of that stranger became clear to them at the end of their journey when they broke bread together—he was the resurrected Christ, who made the scriptures come alive in a way they had never experienced before.

In the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, the Church teaches that when the scriptures are proclaimed in the liturgy, it is Christ himself who is speaking. The Word of God has the power to save us. And so, the Mass that we celebrate today reflects the importance that we give to the proclamation and interpretation of the scripture.

Of all the reforms that were initiated nearly 40 years ago, this recovery of the Liturgy of the Word is perhaps the most profound. We might forget that for centuries, Catholics were not accustomed to hearing a wide selection of scripture passages at Mass or devotions. Still less were homilies focused on the scripture.



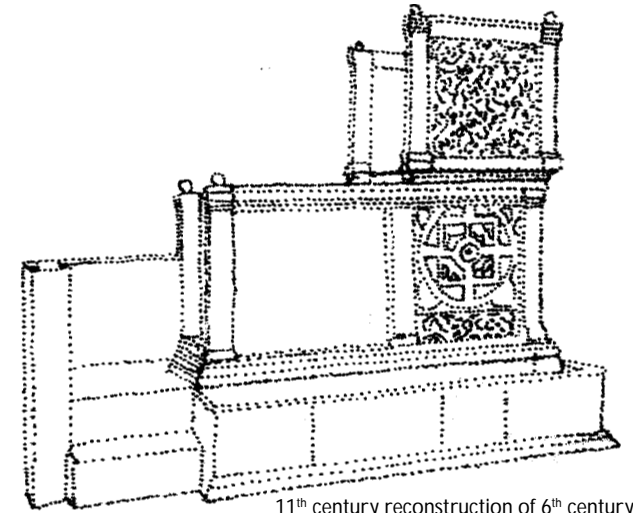
Gospel book-cover,
early 6th century,
Constantinople

Today, Catholics are encouraged to study the scriptures and explore the meaning of the Word in their daily lives. On Sundays, the three-year cycle of readings exposes us to the great stories of our ancestors in faith, the writings of St Paul and the life and teachings of Jesus. Sacraments and all other public expressions of our faith must include some proclamation of the Word. Homilies should be based on the readings and should be given at most liturgies.

The place of the proclamation of the word is called the ambo. To signify its critical relationship to the Eucharist and the altar table, it is often called the table of the Word. At this table, the hungers of our hearts are fed. The ambo must be visible to all and designed to reflect the dignity and reverence we give to the Word proclaimed in our

assemblies. To show its relationship to the table of the Eucharist, it may be designed using some of the design elements of the altar, though it need not look like its twin. It should have a harmonious relationship both with the altar and the architecture of the space as a whole.

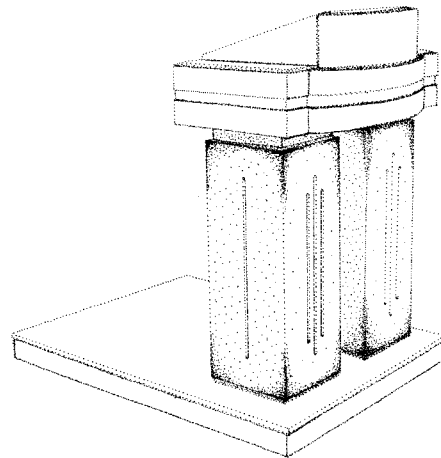
The ambo is generally reserved for the proclamation and interpretation of the scripture and not as a place for announcements or song leading (except in the leading of the psalms). Lectors with physical disabilities can be given an opportunity to participate by a careful design of the reading desk or creating a barrier free space. A well-designed and unobtrusive sound reinforcement system can allow the lector to be heard clearly even in the furthest seat.



11th century reconstruction of 6th century ambo at Castel Sant' Elia, Nepi, Italy

Excerpts from Built of Living Stones

The central focus of the area in which the word of God is proclaimed during the liturgy is the *ambo*. The design of the ambo and its prominent placement reflects the dignity and nobility of that saving word and draws the attention of those present to the proclamation of the word. (GILM 32) Here the Christian community encounters the living Lord in the word of God and prepares itself for the "breaking of the bread" and the mission to live the word that will be proclaimed. An ample area around the ambo is needed to allow a Gospel procession with a full complement of ministers bearing candles and incense. The *General Introduction to the Lectionary* recommends that the design of altar and ambo bear a "harmonious and close relationship" to one another (GILM 32) in order to emphasize the close relationship between word and Eucharist. Since many people share in the ministry of the word, the ambo should be accessible to everyone, including those with physical disabilities. [61]



Contemporary Ambo, granite supports, walnut and maple reading desk, St. Joseph Church, Beltsville, MD

Our reverence for the word of God is expressed not only in an attentive listening to and reflection upon the Scripture, but also by the way we handle and treat the Book of the Gospels. The ambo can be designed not only for reading and preaching, but also for displaying the open Book of the Gospels or a copy of the Scriptures before and after the liturgical celebration. [62]

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