

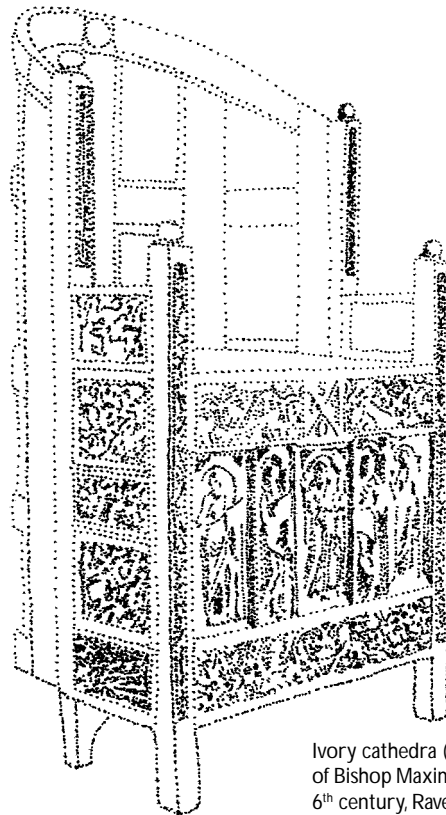
# Environment for Catholic Worship

## Part 4

### Assembly Seating and the Presider's Chair

American visitors to the great cathedrals of Europe are often surprised to notice how few of them have pews or fixed seating of any type. In fact, fixed pews in Christian churches came relatively late in our history—not until the 16<sup>th</sup> century and generally in the Protestant tradition where extended sermons became a central element of the service. They evolved from rows of chairs, to benches, to pews with sides, and finally to box-pews with doors to the aisle often “purchased” by a family for its exclusive use.

Today, there is a wide variety of seating choices for a parish when considering what is best. Flexible seating (chairs) allows the configuration of the assembly to be shaped according to the numbers expected and the rites to be celebrated. However, the demands of the physical rearrangement of the chairs between liturgies or seasons must be taken into consideration. Fixed benches with some flexible seating at the front is often a compromise that allows for some adjustment without the need to reconfigure the entire space. Because our liturgy has always included processions and movement, some congregations may choose benches with open ends instead of pews with sides that tend to restrict the flow and give a sense static enclosure.



Ivory cathedra (chair)  
of Bishop Maximianus,  
6<sup>th</sup> century, Ravenna, Italy

The configuration of the seating should allow everyone to take part in the active participation of the rites. The worship space is neither a concert hall nor a theater. We do not come as spectators. We come as the Body of Christ to join ourselves more fully to Christ in the Word and the Eucharist. There is no stage. Although we give prominence to the place for the Altar and Ambo, we are not passive onlookers to a performance given for our benefit. Instead, we join with Christ in offering ourselves in a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. Next time at Mass, notice that when the presider speaks the words of the Eucharistic prayer, he always uses the pronoun “we”, never “I”.

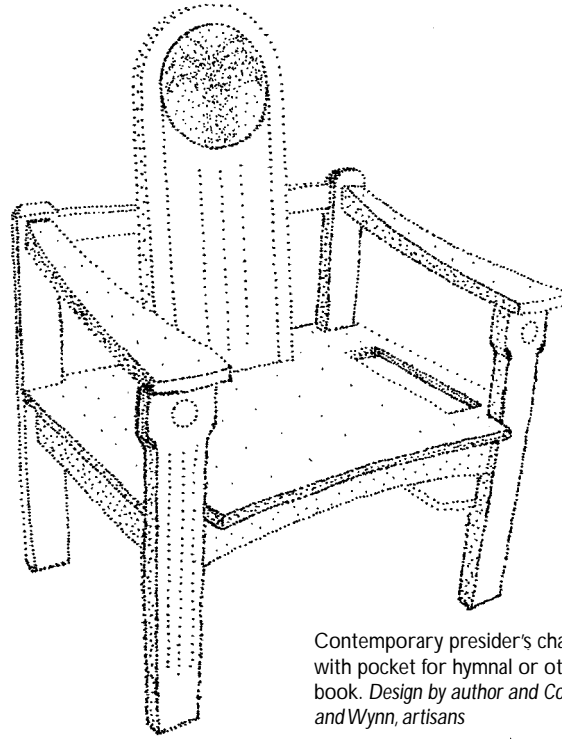
The priest celebrant presides at the Eucharist from a location where he can be seen and heard clearly by all present. Because in his person and role we acknowledge another presence of Christ in our midst, his chair should reflect the dignity of his role in the assembly, but it should not be distant or extravagant.

## Excerpts from Built of Living Stones

The general plan of the building should be such that "in some way it conveys the image of the gathered assembly. It should also allow the participants to take the place most appropriate to them and assist all to carry out their function properly." (RDCA ch 2, no 3) [30]

*The church building fosters participation in the liturgy.* Because liturgical actions by their nature are communal celebrations, they are celebrated with the presence and active participation of the Christian faithful whenever possible. (CIC 837 §2) Such participation, both internal and external, is the faithful's "right and duty by reason of their baptism." The building itself can promote or hinder the "full, conscious, and active participation" (SC) of the faithful. Parishes making decisions about the design of a church must consider how the various aspects and choices they make will affect the ability of all the members to participate fully in liturgical celebrations. [31]

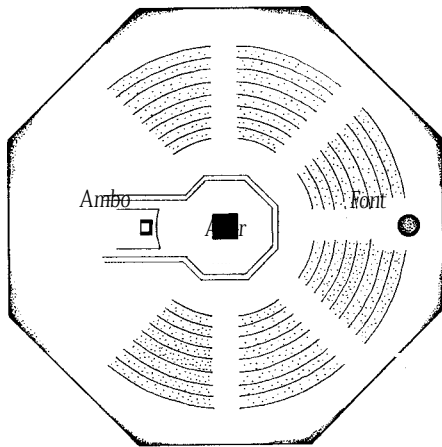
By its design and its furnishings, the church reflects this diversity of roles. The one who presides, those who



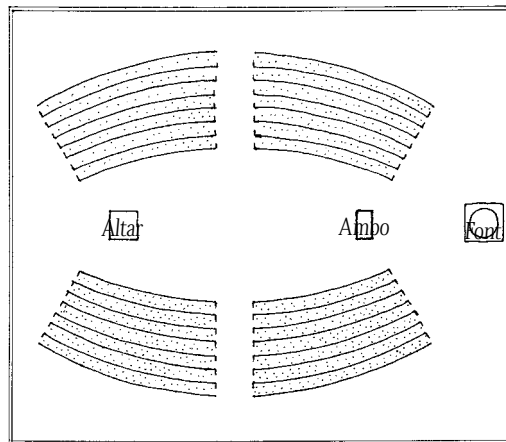
Contemporary presider's chair with pocket for hymnal or other book. Design by author and Condry and Wynn, artisans

proclaim God's word, the ministers of music, those who assist at the altar, and members of the congregation all play an integral part in the public prayer of the Church. The design of the church should reflect the unity of the entire assembly and at the same time insure that each person is able to exercise his or her ministry in a space that fully accommodates the ritual action called for by that ministry. [37]

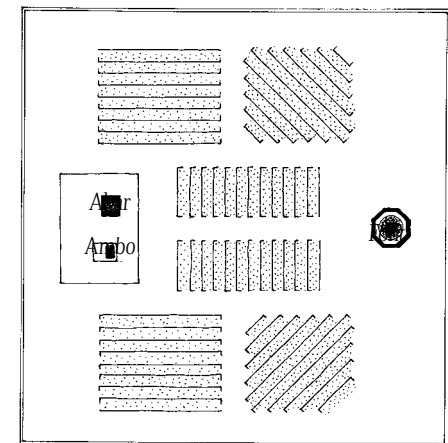
The chair of the priest celebrant stands "as a symbol of his [office] of presiding over the assembly and of directing prayer." (GIRM 310) An appropriate placement of the chair allows the priest celebrant to be visible to all in the congregation. The chair reflects the dignity of the one who leads the community in the person of Christ, but is never intended to be remote or grandiose. The priest celebrant's chair is distinguished from the seating for other ministers by its design and placement. "The seat for the deacon should be placed near that of the celebrant." (GIRM) In the cathedral, in addition to the bishop's chair or *cathedra*, which is permanent, an additional chair will be needed for use by the rector or priest celebrant. (CB 47) [63]



Central Plan with ambo, altar and font on axis



Antiphonal Plan



Sectional Plan