

Environment for Catholic Worship

Part 8

Gathering Space

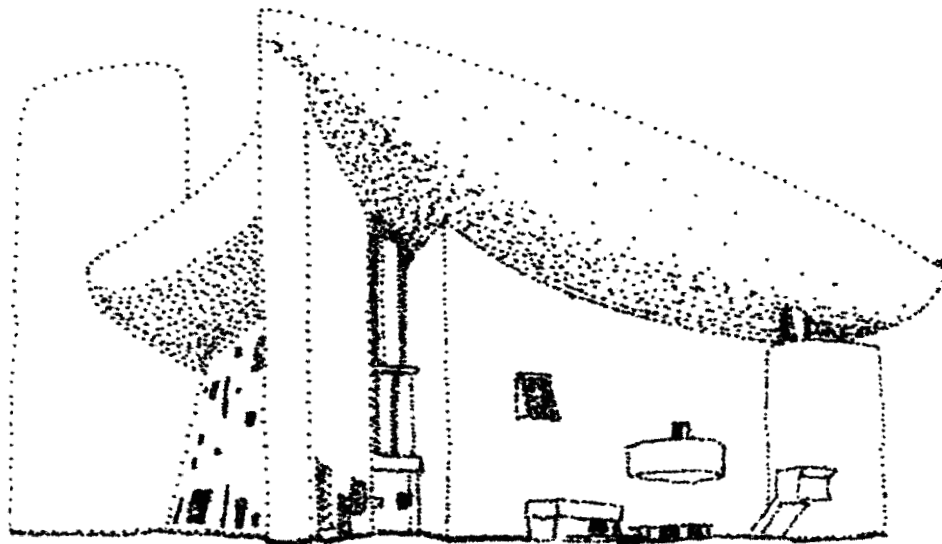
Life is often described as a journey. Even if we rarely leave our own towns or neighborhoods, we are still traveling through time. We often speak of the Christian life as a journey—even a pilgrimage. We set a course, and, though we stumble, we keep our eyes on our destination. Along the way, we recognize Christ traveling with us.

Every Sunday, all over the world, members of Christian households—large and small—begin a journey, a procession from their many homes to the place where they will unite themselves with other believers in the praise and thanksgiving of God. Through a thousand different routines, they prepare to place themselves in the company of friends, neighbors, and even strangers to

respond to God's loving call. The procession may begin calmly in the home of a single person or with all the commotion of a large family running a little late. It may be a short walk or a long drive, but this journey has many stages along the way before we all mark ourselves with the sign of the cross at the greeting of the Mass.

The liturgy is said to be “the source and summit of Christian life.” Notice how even the words “source” and “summit” imply movement. Through the doors of our churches, we bring ourselves, at times, broken, hungry, alone, or confused, to unite ourselves with Christ who has known our pains. At other times, we pass the threshold with great joy, hope and consolation, celebrating the wonderful works of God in our lives. From many individual households we gather in this house of the church.

With that understanding, the design of new and renovated churches often includes an ample narthex or gathering space for people to visit with one another before and after the liturgy. The gathering space encourages people to linger and come to know each other. There we might also learn about the many activities of the parish as it brings about the reign of God in the community.

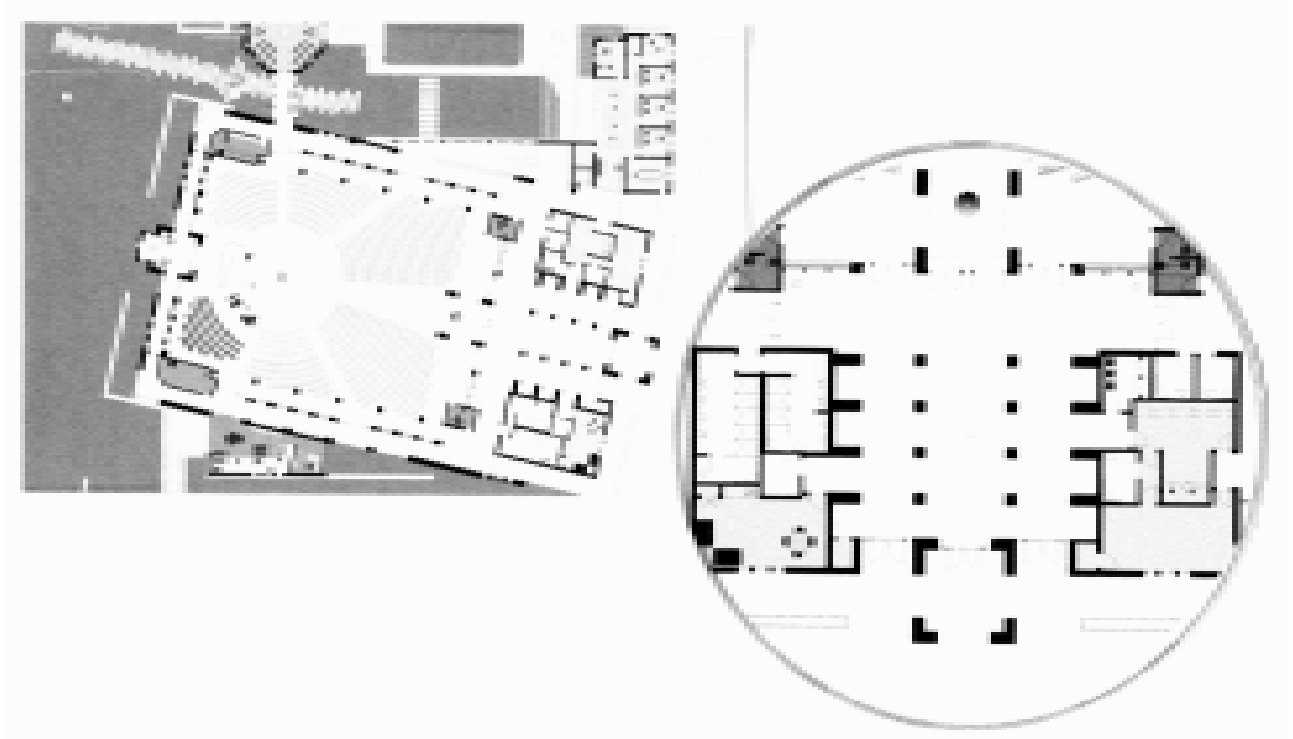


20th century Pilgrim church,
Ronchamp, France.
Architect: Le Corbusier

It also serves liturgically as a place to greet families bringing a child for baptism and for adult candidates for initiation during the Rite of Acceptance. There are moments in the Wedding and Funeral liturgies that are also enhanced by the presence of a significant gathering space. At times throughout the year the entire assembly might process from this space into the hall for the Eucharist.

A vesting sacristy and a room for bereaved families and for brides might also be located nearby. If the narthex provides a view into the main space, this space might also provide a place to walk and comfort an anxious child, as an alternative to a “cry room.” Parishes may also wish to locate an adjacent space for a nursery for use during the liturgy. In colder climates, an opportunity to hang coats nearby is a helpful gesture of hospitality. It also encourages people to be fully present to one another without unnecessary insulation.

The presence of a gathering space will allow those parishioners who wish to visit with one another before and after Mass to do so, while, at the same time, allowing others to pray quietly in the nave.



Gathering area or narthex, with hospitality parlor, vesting sacristy, nursery, ushers room and restrooms in close proximity. *St John the Apostle, Leesburg, VA (Proposed) Morgan Gick and Associates, Architect*

Excerpts from Built of Living Stones

The narthex is a place of welcome—a threshold space between the congregation's space and the outside environment. In the early days of the Church, it was a “waiting area” for catechumens and penitents. Today it serves as gathering space as well as the entrance and exit to the building. The gathering space helps believers to make the transition from everyday life to the celebration of the liturgy, and after the liturgy, it helps them return to daily life to live out the mystery that has been celebrated. In the gathering space, people come together to move in procession and to prepare for the celebration of the liturgy. It is in the gathering space that many important liturgical moments occur: men and women participate in the Rite of Becoming a Catechumen as

they move towards later, full initiation into the Church; parents, godparents, and infants are greeted for the celebration of baptism; and Christians are greeted for the last time as their mortal remains are received into the church building for the celebration of the funeral rites. [95]

In addition to its religious functions, the gathering space may provide access to the vesting sacristy, rooms for choir rehearsal, storage areas, restrooms, and rooms for ushers and their equipment. Adequate space for other gatherings will be an important consideration in planning the narthex and other adjoining areas. [96]

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