

# **Building a New Church**

A Process Manual for Pastors  
and Lay Leaders

*James E. Healy*

*Foreword by Nathan D. Mitchell*



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## Foreword

*Nathan D. Mitchell*

Whenever a parish takes up the challenge to build, renew, or redesign its worship space, it inevitably has to deal anew with its own identity as church. As the bishops of the United States wrote in their statement *Built of Living Stones* (BLS; approved November 16, 2000), “one of the most significant and formative experiences in the life of a parish community is the process of building or renovating a church” (BLS, preface, 1). This means that the process of church construction or renovation is never a utilitarian (often contentious) act calling only for ad hoc decisions about fund-raising, creating finance and facilities committees, choosing an architect, or hiring contractors and engineers. It is a theological enterprise, a spiritual journey. Designing and building spaces and furnishings where the Christian assembly will meet its God in repeated, hospitable acts of washing, anointing, forgiving, marrying, burying, eating, and drinking is faith in action—it’s theology with skin on.

BLS also reminds us that church building or renovation offers a parish the opportunity to review its own history, to reacquaint itself with the basics of liturgical theology, to strengthen and renew its identity as a community of faith, love, service, and witness to Christ’s abiding presence within the world’s tumultuous history (see BLS, preface, 2–3). For, as the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops points out in *Our Place of Worship* (OPW), “a church building is never merely functional; it points beyond itself to convey something about God.

Building, art, and furnishings function symbolically when they share the quality of ‘transparency,’ revealing the Creator behind the created object” (Ottawa: CCCB, 1999, p. 9). The Canadian bishops go on to suggest that every parish planning to build or renovate spaces for liturgical celebration must deal with three questions: *Who are we? What do we do together?* and *What environment do we need* in order to show clearly “who we are” and “what we’re doing” (see OPW, p. 9)? These three questions, the bishops note, are best answered when the community listens attentively to three *voices*—those of the *local parish church*, of the *Church at large*, and of the *physical environment itself* (ibid.).

These three questions—and the three “voices” that help us answer them—are front and center in Fr. James Healy’s invaluable guide to the pastoral processes involved whenever a parish tackles the task of building a new church or renovating an old one. In this brief foreword, I will outline five principles that, in my view, may show us how the “voice of the Church at large” can—through its accumulated wisdom, experience, insight, faith traditions, and theological reflection—help local parishes articulate “*who they are*,” “*what they do together*,” and “*what environment*” best shapes their common faith and worship. These principles are embedded especially in the Second Vatican Council’s Constitution on the Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, SC), in its Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*, LG), and in the most recent edition of the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM 2002).

• **Principle 1: The church is a people before it is a building.** We sometimes forget that one of the charges made against the earliest Christians was that they were “atheists,” i.e., they seemed to have no visible “gods” or “places of worship,” no “public sacrifices” (such as those offered to the Roman emperor), and no “officiating priesthood” (such as the one that ministered at the liturgies of the Jerusalem temple). Christians seemed to gather and pray wherever and whenever it was possible or convenient—in homes, in synagogues, in upper rooms, in prisons, in public squares, on street corners. Moreover, the apostle Paul insisted that the church is not a place but a person, the Body of Christ, member for member. This distinctive identity of the Christian people was highlighted in Vatican II’s Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* (LG). There the world’s bishops asserted that the church is first of all a mystery rooted in God’s own inner life (LG, chap. 1), and that from this mystery flows its identity as pilgrim People of God (LG, chap. 2). In short, the church is not primarily an institution, a geopolitical entity, or a juridical organization, but a living,

squirring people called into being by God's Word and sustained in communion by the Holy Spirit.

- **Principle 2: Worship spaces exist to serve the assembly's liturgy, not vice versa.** Although environment (space, furnishing, ritual objects such as ambo, altar, and font) inevitably shapes the assembly that uses it, the "full and active participation by all the people is the paramount concern, for *it* is the primary, indeed the indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit" (SC 14; emphasis added). Action trumps aesthetics—or to put it better, the *primary* aesthetic of the liturgy is God's holy, pilgrim people actively participating in the central sacraments of our salvation. We do not (or should not) hold worship spaces hostage to a particular "iconographic program" or to a particular "staging arena designed for choir, organ, and instrumentalists." Every church's best iconography is the people who worship there (shabby, soup-stained, and wrinkled though they be), just as its best music is the assembly's song (even when it sounds loud, puny, dull, or off-key).

- **Principle 3: Participatory liturgy requires a participatory church.** When the bishops at Vatican II voted to restore the people's rightful role in the liturgical action—and when they chose to define the church primarily as "mystery" and "pilgrim People of God"—they made it clear that ecclesiological models that concentrate decision-making power in the hands of clerical leaders alone are no longer adequate. This is surely one reason why, in OPW, the Canadian bishops insist that the *voice of the whole local church* is essential (not optional or merely "decorative") for determining who we are as God's People gathering, regularly, to celebrate the Mystery of Christ. The call to holiness, the call to mission and ministry is universal in the church, a consequence of our baptismal incorporation into Christ through the gift of the Spirit, his "first gift to those who believe" (Eucharistic Prayer IV).

- **Principle 4: Christian worship is not "altar-centered" or "ambo-centered," but both.** "The two parts which . . . go to make up the Mass, viz. the liturgy of the word and the eucharistic liturgy, are so closely connected with each other that they form but one single act of worship" (SC 56). The "two tables" (of God's Word, of Christ's Body and Blood) are not rivals or competitors but are "mutually implicative," each evoking and calling forth the other. In our worship, we are simultaneously a people who gather in contemplation around the Word and who share the "one bread and one cup" that makes us "the one body of Christ, a living sacrifice of praise" (Eucharistic Prayer IV).

• **Principle 5: Finally, Christian worship is the starting point, not the destination.** Liturgy is activity with a profoundly eschatological character; it is “food for the journey,” but not the journey’s final goal. Our destination is God’s kingdom (reign, rule), that new creation that gathers all peoples of all times and places into the “wedding feast of the Lamb.” As John tells us in the book of Revelation, “I also saw the holy city, a new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. . . . Behold, God’s dwelling is with the human race. He will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will always be with them. . . . He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning” (Rev 21:2-4; NAB).

In sum, our liturgies, humble and bumbling as they often are, exist for the sake of that heavenly liturgy where God, our gracious Host and Guest, welcomes us home, invites our friends, kills the fatted calf, puts rings on our fingers and festive clothing on our bodies, and says, “I have never left you; I have loved you forever; you are engraved on the palms of my hands; and whenever you call me, I will be there.” This is our common destiny, rooted in our common baptismal vocation. “Without the faith assembly,” OPW tells us, “ministries are pointless. When the assembly gathers to express its faith in a public way through its liturgy, the risen Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit is active amongst the community to lead it in worship of the Father. Each member, endowed with gifts of grace, ‘one having one kind and another having a different kind’ (1 Cor 7.7) shares the Christian vocation to build up the body of Christ by using his or her particular gift for the common good” (OPW, part 1, p. 11). That is who we are. That is what we do. That is why our church buildings are never mere meeting halls; they are the space where “God is dwelling with the human race,” wiping every tear away, destroying death, and bringing us together to the banquet of everlasting life.

*Nathan D. Mitchell, PhD, teaches liturgical studies in the Department of Theology at the University of Notre Dame and is concurrently an associate director of the Notre Dame Center for Liturgy.*

## Preface

This book is written out of the ecclesial experience of an author in the Roman Catholic faith tradition. The references here reflect that denominational affiliation, its terminology and theology. These references are not meant to exclude any readers of other denominations who may benefit from the ideas and processes contained herein. Rather it is the intention of the author that as many people as possible from other faith traditions have access to this material.

Consequently the reader's indulgence is asked when confronted with Catholic terminology. Simply translate such Catholic terms into your own denominational language as is necessary (e.g., *priest* to minister or pastor; *parish* to congregation or church assembly; *parishioners* to congregants or church members; *diocese* to judicatory or regional church authority; *Eucharist* or *Mass* to the Lord's Supper or worship service, and so forth). As for the theology, particularly in chapter 10 on liturgical education, readers of different denominations should substitute their own theology of liturgy and worship, using their own denomination's documents and guidelines.

A cautionary word about hierarchical processes and authorizations. Diocesan procedures for building churches can vary greatly from diocese to diocese. Be sure to check with your diocesan officials at the outset of the planning process so you are clear on what they require from your parish. Other denominations who use this book as a guide also should check with their respective judicatories about their building procedures.

The term *steering committee* evolved during our own building project and stood for the separately created lay leadership group that, with the pastor, business manager, and director of parish liturgy and music, literally steered the parish through those many processes, decisions, and tasks of building a new worship space.

In a genuine ecumenical spirit, it is the hope of the author that other denominations and congregations, their pastors, and lay leaders will find these processes and suggestions valuable along their own journey of building a new church.

## Acknowledgments

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To Denis Greene of The Church Development Foundation (TCDF.org), my personal gratitude for his early and consistent encouragement in the writing and development of this book and for his counsel about the chapters on selecting a fund-raiser, parish strategic planning, the financial feasibility study, and the capital campaign. This book would not be a reality without your support, Denis. Thank you.

To Leon Roberts, construction and real estate manager of the Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas, my genuine appreciation for his technical expertise on matters architectural and beyond. I am especially indebted for his counsel regarding the chapters on selecting an architect, the architectural master plan, acoustical consulting, and specific elements of the pastor's role. Your experience as an architect and your dedication to the church have been inspiring. Thank you.

A special thanks to Ryan Bodenstab for the geometric illustrations in appendix 13.



## Chapter 1

# Who, Us? An Introduction

If you are glancing at this volume, then some part of you suspects, if not already knows, that building a new church might be in your future. Your response to that prospect may range from *Oh, Boy!* to *Oh, God!* to *Who, Me?* If you have been around the church very long at all, it is natural that your response might be found somewhere along a spectrum running from elation to fear to questioning if you are the right person for the job.

*Oh, Boy*, a chance to correct all the errors I've seen and experienced in the churches built by others. *Oh, Boy*, an opportunity to make a mark, to leave a legacy, to help enshrine a faith community's values.

*Oh, God*, a future filled with endless meetings. *Oh, God*, parishioner squabbles over everything and being caught in the middle. *Oh, God*, the dreaded fund-raising, finance committees, and more hassles.

*Who, Me*, I am not qualified to be on a new church building committee. I am just an ordinary, everyday member. *Me*, I don't know if I can or want to. Does the pastor know who is being chosen for this job? I'm just not sure.

Questions and hesitancy, whether by a pastor or a parishioner, are normal. In fact they are healthy, for if there were none you might be the subject in the axiom about rushing in where angels fear to tread. So let me take a moment here at the beginning to address some of these concerns, both of the pastor and of the parishioner being asked to serve on this building committee.

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First, the pastor. If you have some miles on you as a pastor, then I'm guessing there are more *Oh, Gods* than there are *Oh, Boys*. In fact you may have already tried to locate the phone number of the personnel board chairman. You might be having some thoughts like these: "I'm not a builder, not one of those bricks-and-mortar type pastors of the past. I am more of a people-person type of pastor. Just let me minister to the spiritual needs of my people. I don't know anything about building." Well, not so fast there, Reverend. Let me remind you of a few things, if I may be so bold.

Few if any pastors are builders in the strict bricks-and-mortar sense. That's not how we were trained. But neither were the pastors of the past who shouldered those tasks when needed by previous generations of Christians. You have learned many things during your years in the ministry that were not covered in school. You can learn this and do it well.

Yes, you are meant to be a people-person, a minister for others in the image of Jesus Christ, dedicated to caring for the spiritual needs of your people. But this is not the time to become a Jansenistic dualist. People are souls or spirits that are embodied. We Christians are incarnational. We are a sacramental church. We believe that the physical, the material, the bodily is a vehicle for the spiritual. The physical speaks for and embodies the spiritual. And this portion of the Body of Christ entrusted to your care needs a new physical place in time and space for its worship.

I contend that if done thoughtfully, the building of a new church can be (and moreover, should be) the physical sign or *sacramental* of a Christian community that is the here and now locus of the Body of Christ. Building a new church may in fact be the most sacramental thing you can ever do as a pastor, if you do it right.

Next, let me address a few words to the parishioner asked to serve on a building committee. You may feel honored but are perhaps a bit apprehensive. You may be wondering about time commitments, committee responsibilities, qualifications. Yes, the time required will be significant, but usually it's the busy people who get things done. Committee responsibilities will be explained from the start and clarified as the group solidifies and moves from phase to phase. As an active member of this faith community you *are* qualified. You are a member of the Body of Christ in this place and at this time. You worship and pray with these people. They are you. Plus, you will be given information, education, and formation for the tasks asked of you as a building committee member. Some of those you will find here in this book.

Finally, *Why me?* Because your pastor sees something in you that should be brought to this new church project. It may be your personality, your contacts in the parish, your perspective as a lay person, a special talent, or a past or present involvement. Ask about why you were chosen. In short, your pastor should not, and wisely does not, want to attempt to build this new church alone.

The building of a new church space for a community of Christians is the opportunity to call forth from that faith community deep and lasting elements from within its collective psyche. As a team of pastor and laity who are building a new church with the community, you stand in a place of great influence. Together you have the opportunity to form and shape the spiritual life of this community in a way that may be exceeded only by the influence of the founding pastor and parishioners. And if you are the founding group that is charged with building the community's first permanent worship space, then your influence is more than doubly increased.

To stand in a place of great influence, however, is also to accept great responsibility. If this is truly a physical and a spiritual work, then the pastor and the lay leaders need to be at the center and heart of it. You need to lead the people and lead them well. Together you have come to know this community. With your pastor you have the theological background and prayerful formation necessary for the task. You have been publicly called forth to act officially in the name of this faith community.

In short, if not you, then who? And if you do not do it well, a great opportunity will have been missed. You see, the real task here is for the pastor and the building committee to engage with the parishioners to mutually articulate the faith, the worship history, and the community values unique to these people. Help them clarify, refine, and develop those things. Then let those same values bring forth the community's place of worship. Let the consciously reflected values build the building. I contend that with the right processes, there is a much greater chance that those values will be embodied in the church building that you construct together.

Do some of the processes described in this book take more time and energy? In the long haul, they do not. If done properly from the start (even if it is a bit slower in the beginning), you will not have to spend the time and energy backtracking to fix exclusions, omissions, confusions, and ownership issues at the end. It's like the old oil filter commercial on TV: "You can pay me now; or you can pay me later." X-amount of time and energy spent on these processes up front will

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definitely be less painful than Y-amount of feuding, defending, and clearing up after construction.

The processes and suggestions described here do not come from a professional. I have never been on a diocesan building commission. I possess no special background in fund-raising. I have no formal training in group process and shared decision making. I have never been an architect or construction manager. I am just a parish priest. What I have learned, I learned the way many people learned their pastoral skills: OJT, on-the-job training.

My specific situation was that I had pastored a growing Catholic faith community for a number of years when the need to build a new church arose. Previously I, as an associate pastor, had seen traditional building programs up close, though none on the scale of an entirely new church (I had seen a school remodeling, and I had led a parish hall expansion and built an office addition). So I asked myself and others many times, why this? and why that way? Frequently I asked myself how I, were I a parishioner, would like to be included, approached, and treated during the building process. I wondered how I would want to be asked and informed about these things. Furthermore, I was blessed in this parish with a very talented and dedicated staff that constantly suggested better ways to go about this task of building a new church. Many of the suggestions that you will read in this book are the resulting answers to those questions.

This book is meant to be an auxiliary guide from one church builder to other church builders. The chapters at times are addressed to the pastor, but the whole volume is intended to include the principal lay leaders of the parish who will work with the pastor in this task of building. All will benefit greatly, I believe, in reading and studying this book individually and together. This small volume is not meant to replace any local diocesan or judicatory documents, guidelines, or processes. It is meant to compliment and supplement them. For those within the Catholic tradition, there is the United States Catholic Conference document *Built of Living Stones: Art, Architecture, and Worship* (2000). Another helpful document with a very practical bent is the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops document *Our Place of Worship* (1999).

May God bless your work, and may you be guided by the Carpenter's Son.