



Together before God

The Rule of Carmel puts liturgical life at the centre of our community life both in practice and symbolically. The oratory is at the “centre” not just architecturally but identifies it as central to who we are, and it becomes the place of the visible “assembly” of all the brethren where possible.

We are reminded that the liturgy is the most outstanding means by which we express in our community the mystery of Christ. For it is through the liturgy that “the work of redemption” is accomplished.”

The Rule speaks of daily Eucharist and the celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours as constitutive of the nature of our Carmelite community... Liturgy is the Church at common prayer – it is moreover the visible sign of the Order at prayer...

The presence of the living God in Word, in Sacrament, in ritual, in silence in gesture and in song is transformative – it changes the nature of our being community.

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I WILL GO TO THE ALTAR OF GOD (PS 43:4)

Liturgy and Prayer as a school of love: a series from the Liturgy and Prayer Commission



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The beauty of our Order's church buildings is more than architecture and art, more than stone and glass; it is the space where we pass through an invisible veil into the place of encounter with God and with each other. It is the meeting place of God's holy people, where the Christian community *assembles*. These buildings speak also to our own Carmelite story, founded on the realization that God is central to our lives. The physical elements touch our senses, through shape and form, darkness and light, colour, images and traces of created things. In them we can see and touch what is central to our lives, something that is in the 'midst' of the way we live together (Rule 14).

We cannot say exactly how the architecture shapes our worship but we can visualize, through it, how our liturgical space is shaping our lives; for it manifests Christ who is at the centre of our pilgrimage and at the centre we find the *altar*; reminding us of the One who is the 'corner stone'. In this context, the Byzantine liturgy is clear



pointing us to the altar as the "meeting place of heaven and earth, of God, Creator and Redeemer and man (sic) the created and redeemed. It is the throne of God." A contemporary writer puts it this way: "every Christian must remember that the altar is Christ and that he or she is a spiritual altar whose purpose exists in participating in worship around the assembly's common table." Each of the elements, altar, ambo, chair and font form an organism that is interrelated through a ritual that moves us through this space and time while reinforcing our Christian identity. In this place, we are initiated into Christian life (font) travelling together (nave); we hear a common Word in faith (ambo); we are led and directed in prayer (chair); we process to the centre to be nourished by God with the Bread of life and the Cup of our salvation (altar).

The history of church art and architecture points to the unity of 'the living', the models of Christian life in the images of the saints and biblical figures. In our tradition giving a special place for the Mother of Carmel (above the assembly or in a special chapel), and our departed (either below or around the building).

Irrespective of the architectural style, liturgical wisdom teaches us never to obscure these elements with *clutter* that hides or inhibits the beauty of their purpose. We see our church buildings as a "spatial icon" of Church as mystery.

From earliest times the brothers and sisters of Carmel were invited to come together into a sacred space, to gaze upon the Lord and to focus their eyes on what they are doing 'in memory of Him.' Although there does not seem to be any one specific Carmelite architectural model, early history points to the embrace of existing church structures (E. Boaga).

Listening to the Word in common is further enhanced by the chanting of psalms facing each other across choir stalls, as if nourishing each other with the Word 'face to face', while joining the heavenly choirs in "an unceasingly hymned" praise of God (St. Pope Paul VI). Looking at the many wonderful examples of Carmelite liturgical space, especially the choir stalls in places like Bolinda (Brazil), Boppard (Germany), Krakow (Poland), Niagara Falls (Canada), Refice (Brazil), Venice (Italy), and many others, we see that in our tradition the liturgical space facilitates a sanctuary space with two elements: a place for the daily Eucharist and one for the Liturgy of the Hours. It has been noted that in more recent times some communities have retired, out of sight to private oratories, rather than allowing the glorious praise in the Hours to ascend to God's throne from 'the midst of the people'.

So, we Carmelites are invited, once again, to "be made joyful in this house of prayer.... for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all the people" (Is 56:7) Let us look at our places of worship and renew our desire to render visible our prayer and worship 'in the midst of the people' treasuring these places, directing our lives to the greater glory of God.

