

The Ambo

As a lector, I have stood at the ambo many times, but the word “ambo” was always somewhat foreign to me. You don’t hear it outside of the church context like you do the word “altar.” I don’t think I have even heard it used in relation to a Protestant church. As the renovation committee worked with New Holland to create our new ambo, I got an education.

The word “ambo” comes from a Greek word meaning rim or raised area. In the Old Testament, the scriptures were usually read from a raised platform. Of course, this is a very practical idea. It is best if the people listening can see and hear the reader clearly. Spiritually, we read in the scriptures how mountains and high areas are linked symbolically to connect with God. Examples include Moses receiving the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai and the Transfiguration on Mt. Tabor. At the Ascension, Jesus was lifted up to the Father from the Mount of Olives. The design of the ambo, then, fulfills both practical and symbolic requirements.

The original ambos used by the early church were smaller and portable, but with established church structures, ambos became fixed pieces. Over time they became more ornate, and eventually, there were two—one for reading the Epistle and one for reading the Gospel. Gradually, the Gospel came to be read from the altar, and the ambo fell out of use.

The “Constitution on the Divine Liturgy” from the Second Vatican Council greatly expanded the reading of scripture and re-established the importance of the proclamation of the Word. In the Roman Missal, it is explained this way, “The Church is nourished spiritually at the twofold table of God’s word and of the Eucharist: from the one it grows in wisdom and from the other in holiness.” This development brought the return of the ambo to church furnishings. The scriptures are to be read only from the ambo, and the homily is given from the ambo since it flows from the scriptures. The lectern is for other things like the announcements or “Sermon on the Amount.”

The Church sees the ambo as more than a lectern. It must be “elevated, fixed, and of suitable design and nobility” (GIRM). Our new ambo meets these practical requirements. It also beautifully blends with the design of the altar as a twofold table to indicate the “harmonious and close relationship of the ambo with the altar.” (Lectionary for the Mass)

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