

# SACRED GATHERING

As the community of St. Cecilia's looks to expand its sacred space an important addition will be that of a gathering space. The following reflection will look briefly at the history of gathering spaces in both sacred and secular buildings, the importance of this space both in terms of function and liturgy, and what the current church guidelines are for such a space.

## BRIEF HISTORY OF GATHERING SPACES:

In ancient times the open courtyard or atrium was created for the purpose of gathering or welcoming both in private homes and in public buildings. The ancient Jewish temple had an outer courtyard and inner "holy of holies." The remains of an early house church includes a courtyard, a large room for Eucharist, and a baptistry. The Roman public buildings also had a forum (open area enclosed by colonnades) from which one entered the basilica or public meeting building. As the church grew and became centralized in Rome it adapted the basilica plan for worship spaces. The courtyard became the gathering place of the faithful. Often a fountain would be placed in the center of this area to provide refreshment and cleansing for the faithful who had often traveled a distance.



The largest exterior gathering space is the piazza at St. Peter's in Rome. The curved Bernini colonnades were designed to be like maternal arms reaching out to embrace the entire church. Most of the large cathedrals in Europe have a piazza that gathers, invites and leads one to the portal of the church.

In Northern Europe, where the climate was much colder, the gathering area was often enclosed to protect worshippers and pilgrims from the outdoor elements. Over time this important area of the church decreased in size, the fountains were often eliminated and eventually replaced by tiny bowls of water attached to the wall, and the space became a very small vestibule.

Secular architecture has retained the use of large atriums and courtyards. We need only to look at our modern day malls, hotels, concert halls, museums, and convention centers to see how functionally important and aesthetically beautiful these areas can be. Should not our sacred gathering spaces be given even more attention and importance than our public spaces?

## GATHERING FOR EUCHARIST

Our gathering to celebrate Eucharist begins when we leave our homes. As we enter the church property the external environment with its landscaping, art work and lighting can contribute to a sense of welcome and transition from our everyday activities to a sacred action. The outside areas of the church complex can proclaim the Gospel to the city or town in which it is located. The trees, shrubs and flowers at St. Cecilia's help create this sense of beauty and welcome. How walkways are set can heighten the sense of gathering and journey into a sacred space. A bell tower and the ringing of bells can be another means of helping people to gather and is one that has a long, rich tradition in the Church.

Marchita Mauck in her book, Shaping a House for the Church, says “As we move to and into the church building, we need to transform our lives from the external noisiness of the journey into an inner openness and quiet at the end.” Each person must see himself or herself as privileged and summoned to join with others and contribute who they are to the harmony and unity of the whole gathering body of Christ. We come together not for private worship, but for communal worship as the People of God.

### **GUIDELINES FOR A GATHERING SPACE:**

The size of a gathering space is determined in large part by the size of the assembly. A gathering space is frequently about 1/3 the size of the worship space. The creative use of both natural and artificial light is important in enhancing the experience of transition to and from the worship space to the exterior environment. Materials used in the space need to relate to those used in the worship space and will also often relate to exterior finishes as well.

The bishops’ document, Built of Living Stones, states the following relative to the gathering space of a church.

95. 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 and 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. In 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.

96. 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.

97. The doors to the church have both practical and symbolic significance. They function as the secure, steady symbol of Christ, “the Good Shepherd” and “the door through which those who follow him enter and are safe [as they] go in and go out.” In construction, design and decoration, they have the ability to remind people of Christ’s presence as the Way that leads to the Father. Practically, of course, they secure the building from the weather and exterior dangers, expressing by their solid strength the safe harbor that lies within. The appearance and height of the church doors reflect their dignity and address practical considerations such as the accommodation of the processional cross or banners.

### **REFLECTION QUESTIONS:**

How will a gathering space at St. Cecilia’s help build community?

What would be some important elements to enhance the function and aesthetics of a gathering space?