Chapel of the Incarnation: a functional metaphor

Simple designs preserve its sense of intimacy

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The Chapel of the Incarnation stands in the center of the University of Dallas campus, a large, circular form with a pitched roof and broad expanses of brick and copper. From a distance, it looks severe and monolithic, a dramatic landmark that doesn't beckon irresistibly. But close up, the chapel becomes considerably warmer and less imposing, its apparent bulk resolved in a subtle blend of modern materials and traditional forms and details.

Designed by Landry and Landry of Dallas in association with Ford, Powell and Carson of San Antonio, the new chapel (dedicated in March) replaces an improvised version used by faculty and students for a decade. Each Sunday, they transformed a small lecture room in nearby Lynch Hall into a chapel, erecting a portable altar and dressing up the space with candles and liturgical banners. Whatever its aesthetic limitations, the space had a directness and intimacy that the congregation insisted be preserved in the new chapel.

It has been, even though the new chapel seats 500 people and contains many of the accouteries of a flourishing parish church. The main sanctuary is a circle, the oldest and most intimate of shapes, which wraps an octagon of concrete columns and beams that support the ceiling. For once again the route to the altar is oblique.

The congregations' approach is at a 45-degree angle to the altar. It crosses a covered porch and a large narthex or vestibule that constitutes a contemporary variation on the forecourts of Gothic and Romanesque churches. Here the congregation gathers before and after Mass, preparing itself for the ritual to come and reorienting itself to the world once it is over. Metaphorically, this oblique entry recalls the tortuous path to faith that is characteristic of contemporary life. We no longer approach the altar directly and confidently; the route is more likely to be circuitous and mined with doubts.

One corner of the vestibule contains a small chapel, simply furnished and illuminated by an octagonal skylight over the tabernacle. Between the chapel and the sanctuary is the baptistery, set off by four massive concrete columns like those in the main sanctuary. Once again, for the spiritual journey of the individual believer. One enters the sanctuary through the baptistery as one enters the larger community of faith through the purifying waters of the sacrament.

The passage from the vestibule to the sanctuary is particularly dramatic, like moving from a shadowy interior room to a solarium. The ceiling is 50 feet high instead of 10, and the semidarkness of the baptistery is eclipsed by streams of light from two wide clerestory windows above. There is nothing discreet or sentimental about the sanctuary. The massive columns and beams that support the dome are celebrated architecturally, the way they were in the grand churches of the past.

The altar is on the south side of the sanctuary, surrounded on three sides by movable chairs. The columns nearest the altar are slightly closer together than those farther back to focus attention on the priest.

The congregation now has a solemn and sacred space for worship.

The Dallas Morning News: Jim Burton

The use of handcrafted fixtures and furniture in the building underscores the continuity with the past that is basic to the chapel design. It also confirms the durable influence of the late O'Neil Ford, who designed several buildings at UD and for whom architects Duane and Jane Landry once worked.

Being attached to a university with a more or less constant resident population, the Chapel of the Incarnation avoids the difficulties of many fledgling congregations, for whom the worship space must also serve as a day school, gymnasium and cafeteria. Whatever these other churches say about the social mission of the church, they destroy the sense of wonder and mystery that is an integral part of community worship.

In the Chapel of the Incarnation, the congregation's desire for a solemn and sacred space has been met. And the movement from point to point within the building, the so-called processional, is as important as the individual forms and artifacts. It is finally what moves the chapel past mere utility toward metaphor, and ultimately toward art.