

Sacred Space

If we believe as we do that God resides in the material world by virtue of the incarnation of the Son of God, we must take seriously the reality that space itself becomes sacred. In the contemplative tradition sanctified space varies tremendously in context and environment. Sacred space for contemplatives ranged from large monastic buildings - housing monastic cells, small chapels or large sanctuaries, courtyards, gardens, orchards, basically a very small town - to a small cell at the entrance of a church or even a cave on a mountain. Sacred space for the contemplative could be quite elegant and decorated with icons encased in silver or gold, elaborate stone or wood altars, the iconostasis with beautifully painted icons on the great doors, the sweet fragrance of incense, the flickering light of oil lamps, the encased relics of saints, and the polyailaion (a chandelier of sort). Or the sacred space could consist of a few icons, a makeshift or carved altar, a light source, and texts or letters. Basically there is a wide range of what constitutes sacred space for the contemplative.

Living in the Southwest I am constantly reminded about the importance and significance of sacred space. The local newspaper has run various articles about people's home sanctuaries. The local library's Southwest section houses numerous books on people's home sanctuaries as well as historical sacred spaces throughout the Southwest, which include churches, mountains, lakes and streams, natural hot springs, ancient Pueblos, monasteries, and other unique geological areas like Canyon de Chelly or the Grand Canyon. The Southwest seems permeated with a long history of sacred space. Sacred space here often causes me to pause often during the course of the day in order to connect to the divine energies present all around me. This constant reminder of the divine energies is the intent and purpose of creating sacred space.

Contemplative sacred space is at once both personal and public. On a recent visit to El Santuario de Chimayo, an ancient pre-Christian holy site that has been a Christian place of worship and pilgrimage for over 400 years, I witnessed the claiming of public sacred space for individual sacred space. As I sat in the sanctuary I first took in the uniquely distinctive characteristics of Southwestern Catholicism. The sanctuary, constructed of adobe, has large beautifully-carved wooden vigas across the ceilings, large wooden screens on either side of the sanctuary with various images of saints and angels painted on them, a large ornately painted wood rerebos (altar screen) with a plethora of religious symbols, a stunning carved wood altar rail once more painted with religious symbols, and an altar crowded with free standing santos (3-D figures). As I absorbed the unique blend of Spanish and Indigenous religious traditions depicted in the sanctuary, I watched the wide assortment of people who came to the sanctuary to pray or to learn. Many people were carrying rosaries, bibles, and crosses. As they entered and exited the space they were indeed in a profound state of prayer. As I left the sanctuary, I proceeded towards the altar and exited to a

door on the left. I gasped as I witnessed a sacred space both very public and very private.

Chimayo is known as a pilgrimage site for its miraculous healing dirt and this space bore loud testimony to its healing powers. As I examined the space, I realized how personal this space had become for many people. I read many of the notes pinned to the wall. Some of the notes were of thanksgiving for restored health for loved ones; some were prayer requests for loved ones who had passed away; still others were prayer requests for pregnancies; and as a sign of our times, there were requests for the safe return of family members from the Iraqi/Afghanistan Wars. The space also had many pictures of loved ones hanging on the wall, an enormous collection of crutches, canes, braces, and wheelchairs, and an extremely large collection of personal religious items of crosses, bibles, and rosaries. This very sacred public space had become for them all there very own. The public and the private sanctity of the space was evident and powerful.

Sacred space connects the contemplative to God's presence in the divine energies in the world around them. Sacred space becomes the place where the contemplative is reminded of God's divine energies. The sacredness of the space functions as a kind of open window to the divine presence, which stands open and ready to receive visitors seeking God. In a sense, God is present everywhere and every place is sacred. In another sense, we open the window of our space to God so that simply by entering it, as pilgrims do the Sanctuario, we come into God's presence.