I am delighted to say a few introductory words about this significant book that has been edited by the indefatigable historical theologian and liturgical scholar, Tom O’Loughlin. He has assembled eighteen international and ecumenical authors and reprinted one very significant essay by the late Richard Hurley who was responsible for the Eucharist Room at the Carlow Liturgical Centre. I was honoured to be asked to submit one of the chapters.

Let me begin with a quote from the ever-eloquent Aidan Kavanagh, whose book, Elements of Rite, is referenced in the book’s text:

What the church building shelters and gives setting for is the faithful assembly, the Church, in all its rich diversity of orders from catechumen to penitent, from youngest server to eldest bishop. As it meets for worship of the Source and Redeemer of all, the assembly is the fundamental sacrament of God's pleasure in Christ on earth.

This quote, I would maintain, gets to the heart of what Tom and his collaborators have tried to do in this book. In the light of the modern liturgical reform our liturgical space needs to be so arranged that we can meet one another as the Body of Christ.

Why is this book important today? It is not secret that there has been a significant movement among some Roman Catholics to return to an older form of church arrangement which even if it technically adheres to the General Instruction of the Mass – with its free-standing altar – hearkens back to a pre-Vatican spatial arrangement. This is the case with the 2019 (!) newly build Chapel of the Holy Cross at the Jesuit High School in Tampa, Florida.
Looking straight on one can almost think there is no free-standing altar. Notice in addition the insertion of altar rails for the purposes of communion on one's knees. This chapel is (sadly) a statement that the only way for the Roman Catholic Church to go forward is to go back.

On the other hand, the spaces described and pictured in our collection are clearly attempts to provide a space that makes the celebration of the post-Vatican II liturgy a living reality. I include here other churches which have made similar liturgical reforms in the past sixty years.

One such attempt is the St. Ignatius Chapel recently constructed at Seattle University.

The renowned architect, Stephen Holl, arranged a room which is filled with “bottles of light” that change at different times of the day. As Chris Irvine points out in his essay, light is a fundamental ingredient in a space for the Body of Christ – in the multiple senses of that phrase. Note the remarkable pre-Vatican Dominican convent chapel in Vence.

Of course, many liturgical spaces have not been newly constructed but rather renovated in accord with the principles of the modern liturgical movement. One such church is St. Joseph’s Cathedral in San Jose, California – a church in the form of a Greek cross - which was re-organized in a central plan. Another is Richard Giles controversial re-arrangement of the Episcopal Cathedral in Philadelphia.
One finds another centralized arrangement in St. Vincent de Paul Church (Albany, NY) which was renovated under the guidance of the liturgical consultant, Richard Vosko, who contributed one of the essays in our book.

A good, more local, example of what I would consider a successful renovation is St. Mel’s Cathedral in Longford, Diocese of Ardagh and Clonmacnoise. The renovation in 2014 followed a fire in 2009 and demonstrated our clean lines even in a traditional configuration can invite the assembly to active participation.
It is possible to reconfigure spaces to make them more accommodating to the liturgical reform. I give as an example my own Jesuit community chapel in Boston, MA which was first (2010) configured like what I call a “bowling alley”.

Eventually the space was reconfigured more creatively into a choir-style arrangement, although not without some pushback from a few community members who wanted to “face the Lord” – in other words the altar and the tabernacle as opposed to the whole Body of Christ assembled in worship.

Using two rooms is another proposed solution in *Shaping the Assembly*. A good example is the Monastery of New Camaldoli in Big Sure, California where one room serves for the divine office and the liturgical of the word and a more open space is employed for the celebration of the Eucharist as well as eucharistic adoration.

My final example is the creative renovation of Portsmouth Cathedral under the direction of then Provost David Stancliffe (later Bishop of Salisbury). The building was an amalgamation of several components that Stancliffe turned into a processional (stational) space with a gathering space at the West end, a processional path through the baptismal space under the bell tower, to an area for the liturgy of the word and the daily office and on to a space for gathering around the Eucharistic table and finally a chapel for the reservation of the sacrament (in a hanging pyx). Stancliffe’s renovation shows what a creative imagination can do with a solid modern liturgical theology.
I will conclude with a statement by the editor, Tom O’Loughlin, which in my opinion eloquently sums up the intent and value of this book:

“If our space adequately allows for our worship, then that space becomes in itself our theology.”

Thomas O’Loughlin, *Shaping the Assembly*, 31