Sanctuary: A Place Apart

Edward W. Schmidt S.J.

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A sanctuary is a holy place. It is a place set aside, set apart for sacred encounters between God and his human subjects. It is a place for worship, for ritual, for prayer, for special time when everyday things are allowed to rest for a while.

In the bible, sanctuary refers most precisely to the Temple in Jerusalem, whether to its Holy of Holies or to the whole Temple complex. References vary. This is where the people made sacrifice and other offerings to the Lord. A priest presided over these rites.

According to the Bible Dictionary, sanctuary is used twice in a derived sense, indicating a place of refuge, where “the Lord refers to himself metaphorically as the ‘sanctuary’ (i.e. refuge) of faithful Israelites in distress.” This occurs in Isaiah 8:14 and Ezekiel 11:16.

The book of Numbers too establishes six sanctuaries, cities of refuge, where someone who has accidentally killed someone else can flee for safety and for trial. There are strict rules governing these places of refuge. But their point is to provide a place where a society can face a bad situation fairly and calmly.

In Christian churches, the sanctuary is the area around the altar, considered especially sacred for the rites performed there. This area is often raised above the level of the floor of the main space of the church. In earlier times it was set off by an altar rail, which is still sometimes seen.

In Christian Europe “sanctuary” early developed the sense of a place where one who was pursued for political or criminal reasons could flee for a time of safety. These places were usually the churches, and the concept was governed by civil law. But they were recognized as a societal need to let passions cool and to allow truth to be discovered and heard. Here the church provided an alternative to the workings of the state.

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By Edward W. Schmidt, S.J.
English usage often extends “sanctuary” to a place of safety for birds or other animals or for plants. In my younger days, Kennedy Park in our neighborhood in Chicago had a “bird haven” at 113th and Maplewood. “Haven” is a regular synonym for “sanctuary.”

In the United States, sanctuary became important in the resistance to the war in Viet Nam, where churches offered to protect men drafted from having to go into the army. Results were not great. Canada too had a sanctuary movement for U.S. draftees who did not support the war.

Recent times have seen the rise of “sanctuary cities,” cities that have declared themselves safe for migrants and refugees. Sanctuary cities were established for refugees from wars in Central America during the 1980s. And today the concept has returned to provide some protection for refugees that some government policies seek to exclude or expel.

A group of religious sisters based in Pennsylvania, the Adorers of the Blood of Christ, among their good works have been active in ecological issues. They have issued a “Land Ethic” which reads in part: “Whereas, we Adorers of the Blood of Christ believe creation is a revelation of God, we proclaim that … As prophets, we reverence Earth as a sanctuary where all life is protected; we strive to establish justice and right relationships so that all creation might thrive.”

Sanctuary now becomes a movement for American universities. When plans for mass deportations were announced in November 2016, many students rose up in protest, particularly to protect their fellow students who might have been undocumented. And without using the term “sanctuary,” at the end of November 2016 most of the presidents of the Jesuit colleges and universities signed a statement expressing their commitment to their students who might be targeted for deportation.

The specific issues have changed through the ages, but the need for protection, for a place of safety, for refuge, for sanctuary endures.

Edward W. Schmidt, S.J., is the editor of Conversations; he is also a senior editor at America Media.

(Nota that other articles in this issue help to explain the term sanctuary: Howard Gray’s “Sanctuary of the Heart,” page 8, and John McKay’s “Law, Policy, and the Sanctuary Campus,” page 30.)