

## For an Understanding of the Chapel at St. Mary High School



This Chapel at St. Mary High School is a “holy place”. When you enter here you walk on “holy ground”.

While only our God is truly “holy”, in so far as any person, any place, any action, any gesture brings us closer to God, that person, that place, that action or gesture is also “holy.” When we are in the presence of holiness our best response is a quiet reverence and respect.

The Chapel is a special holy space within this school. It is near the entrance and reminds all that when we come to this school we are invited to be more closely connected to God. That is how we become holy. The God who dwells in all creation, is also within us. It is within our heart that God speaks to us, where we listen, and where we best talk to our God.

Through the ages humans have found ways to respond to God’s presence through all time. We know God in our hearts and in our worlds, and we respond individually and as societies according to our own cultures. Cultural responses to the presence of God have come down to us from our ancestors in prayers, in symbols of belief, in worship, in sacred songs and in sacred dance. When we look at how different cultures express religious beliefs and worship, we find many things in common. We should not be surprised, since all of us have responded to the goodness and presence of one God.

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The architect who designed this room created a space which consists of a large circle within a square room. The circle is divided into four sections / quadrants which are aligned to the four cardinal directions. The circle is a space that invites students to be seated in a way that they become part of that circle, focused on a common centre. That was a deliberate way of engaging you with each other while focussing your attention to what is at the centre of this space.

For those who understand the traditional teachings of the First Nations Peoples of this land, such a circle with four directions is known as the Sacred Hoop or the Medicine Wheel. We will walk the Sacred Circle in a good way and in balance if we keep our focus on what is at the centre .... the place where we meet our God. Here we find the strength and insight to walk our life journey as individuals and as a people.

When you came into the chapel you first encountered a bowl of water. The water is a sign of your baptism, and you are invited to place your fingers into the water and sign yourself with the cross, expressing your unity with the Lord whose sister or brother you became in baptism.

Then you encountered the Ambo, the place where we encounter God's word to us in Sacred Scriptures, and in which we truly do meet our God. The book of God's word is enthroned here and the book should remain open as an invitation for each of us to read, and so to encounter God speaking to our hearts.

Directly ahead of the altar of God's word, is a larger table which is the Altar of God's love most fully expressed to us and most fully present to us as Jesus in the Eucharist. It is at this altar that we remember the power and wonder of God's love expressed in the life and sacrifice of God's only Son. It is Jesus, who as he died for us, gave himself to us to be our food and drink. This sacred food and drink strengthens our bodies minds and hearts.

It is our God, and the sign of God's powerful love for us, that is at the centre of this Sacred Circle. It is to this table that we are called to be nourished and united with each other. Then when we turn and leave this space, we will be "Eucharist" out in the rest of the school and in the rest of the world. Eucharist is not something that only happens in special holy places such as a church or this chapel, it is something that has to happen within each of us and so we can bring our God into our world.

Beyond the altar is the chair to be used by the priest who leads us in worship and calls the Lord to be present to us in the Word and at the Altar. Beside that chair is a simple cross that reminds us that the gifts we receive here were purchased at a great price. We are called to join in the death of Jesus so that we can also rise with him.

Look at the altar again. Carved into the top is a cross within a circle. It is also a Sacred Hoop / Sacred Circle or Medicine Wheel. The Sacred Hoop is a way of living and walking our journey on earth in balance and in harmony with the plans of God. The

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Sacred Hoop is walking our life journey, being very mindful of the many gifts that God gives us for each part of our journey. These are gifts from all of the Sacred Directions. We know that we are being called to come closer to the centre of our self, the centre of the community, the centre of the Sacred Circle where we most directly encounter our God. When you come here to pray, when you come here to gather around the altar of the Lord to celebrate Eucharist, you are invited to come to the centre to be nourished and connected to Jesus himself.

A better understanding of the Sacred Hoop is to think of it as a sphere, with fully half beneath the horizontal plane. God is present to us in the earth, in all creation and in the universe above the earth. Our prayers are supported by all parts of creation and together we raise our hands and hearts to the skies in our effort to reach toward our God. This sacred sign of First Nations peoples expressed in the structure of the furniture is a very good sign that also expresses what we are called to be and do as followers of Jesus. The vertical lines of the legs of the altar and ambo, the vertical grain patterns of the birch wood, are intended to draw our eyes and mind upward in prayer. That is what we do when we encounter the “holy one” in a “holy place.” We stand with respect and reverence, and from our hearts, we whisper “Thank You!” In other words, we express our worship to God.



(Notes regarding care of the furniture: The altar and ambo should be lifted by at least two people and never dragged. Dragging can damage the the wood panels. Simple water can be used to clean off the surfaces. If you do use a furniture polish, use one that does not build up on the surface. The altar and ambo top and chair seat are attached with special cleats to permit horizontal movement of the wood as moisture levels change in the wood. Contact Gerald Regnitter at Friendly Forest with any other questions.)