

The Ambo

Together with the altar and celebrant's chair, the ambo is considered one of the three principal liturgical furnishings in the sanctuary of every Catholic church. Theologically, the ambo signifies the dignity of the Word of God proclaimed and magnifies its importance. It is the piece of furniture from which the Word of God is proclaimed, the Responsorial Psalm sung and, often, the homily preached. Thus, it will typically be used 6 times during Mass: The First Reading, the Responsorial Psalm, the Second Reading, the Gospel, the homily, and the Universal Prayer.

The word "ambo" comes from a Greek word meaning "step" or "elevation." Since the 4th century Christians were accustomed to using a raised platform during Mass to chant or read the Epistle (typically a reading from St. Paul's letters) and Gospel.

The history and current use of the ambo: Some historians believe it is connected to the platform used by Jewish rabbis to read the scriptures before the people. Spiritually, it is derived from the action of Jesus — "When he saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he had sat down, his disciples came to him. He began to teach them..." (Matthew 5:1-2).



The history as the liturgy developed two ambos were put in place to distinguish between the Epistle and the Gospel. The Epistle ambo was placed on the southern side of the sanctuary, while the Gospel ambo was located on the northern side. Ambos were designed in various ways, always with a place for the book to be read with several steps leading up to it. By the 14th century the use of ambos was in a steady decline.



Is the ambo the same as the pulpit? Historically, they were different. Immediately succeeding the ambo in liturgical function was the pulpit. The word stems from the Latin *pulpitum*, and was originally used to denote a theatrical stage. In medieval churches it became a platform primarily used for preaching. The pulpit was located in the center of the nave (the place where the people stood) and was highly elevated to allow the priest to adequately address his congregation.

After the Protestant Reformation pulpits became a central feature of Protestant churches, while in Catholic churches the use of pulpits steadily declined.

In the Catholic Church both ambo and pulpit were no longer in general use by the 19th century, especially in newly constructed churches. Instead there would often be a moveable lectern that was brought out for sermons and taken away for the remainder of Mass. But that, too, has changed:

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal has the following instructions:

It is appropriate that generally this place be a stationary ambo and not simply a movable lectern. The ambo must be located in keeping with the design of each church in such a way that the ordained ministers and readers may be clearly seen and heard by the faithful. From the ambo only the readings, the Responsorial Psalm, and the Easter Proclamation (Exsultet) are to be proclaimed; likewise it may be used for giving the Homily and for announcing the intentions of the Universal Prayer. The dignity of the ambo requires that only a minister of the word should stand at it.

