

THE PARISH OF THE HOLY CROSS, NESCONSET, NY - The Parish of the Holy Cross occupies the top of a hill in a characteristic eastern Long Island woodland composed of pin oaks and scrub pines. The roughly pentagonal shape of the 4.5 acre site, about a third of which slopes steeply up from an adjacent main road, provoked us to arrange the parking in a thin band around the perimeter of the property to maintain a wide buffer of trees around the centrally positioned church. As parishioners arriving by car turn off the main road to begin their ascent, they see - through a veil of tree trunks - a detached bell tower at the top of the hill signifying the call to worship. After parking, parishioners proceed from their cars through the buffer of trees, allowing the trees to act as a filter between the secular world and the sacred precinct of worship constituted by the church. An outdoor atrium gathers the parishioners as they emerge from the woodland filter, before they enter the building itself.

The integral organization of the church reflects the recent thinking about Catholic church design outlined in Environment and Art in Catholic Worship, written and adopted by the church to encourage a more open, less arcane worship experience. A large interior atrium serves as the dual purposes of indoor gathering for non-worship events of up to 400 people as well as for overflow seating for Masses during Christmas and Easter. The main sanctuary, which accommodates up to 575 worshippers on three sides of the altar platform, takes its inspiration from two sources. While its overall scale and roof forms recalls many of the larger rural buildings that used to exist in the area, the four white steel trees suggest the ribs of Gothic stone vaulting, or the outstretched arms of Christ on the cross.

The other elements of the plan - entrance, interior atrium, daily chapel, sacristies, offices - are given their own smaller scale and character in order to make these programmatic elements legible on the exterior and intimate on the interior. The simple material palette of black slate floors, white stucco walls, and cedar clapboard ceilings, is consistent throughout the building to reinforce the idea that all the activities of the parish are integral parts of the worship experience.