

# **BUILT OF LIVING STONES: ART, ARCHITECTURE AND WORSHIP**

The Guidelines for building or renovating Churches National Conference of Catholic Bishops—November 2000  
(Articles compiled for the bulletin by Sr. Mary Rose Menting over the summer of 2012)

## **Introduction**

A characteristic of Christians is how they love one another even while they meet the challenge of renovating a place of worship. It may be difficult and the fabric of the assembly may fray and tear. But the Spirit's work in the assembly of God's People encourages cooperation so that each can perform a task for building up the Body of Christ. During a building process, the community works together with the diocese and the universal Church as another way of building up the Church with the "living stones" from which God's assembly is made. If the community looks upon its work with the eyes of faith, then it can be assured that God will bring the good work to completion.

Building or renovating a Church is itself an act of worship, because beauty is a reflection of God and a "call to transcendence." All Church buildings should mirror divine beauty, balancing the social needs of the local faith community with their duty to worship God thru beauty, affects the equation of design and execution. Beauty can also be found in the creative use of light, water and sound; in elegant design and in worthy religious art.

Liturgy is "the participation of the People of God in the work of God." Churches, therefore, must be places "suited to sacred celebrations," dignified and beautiful. Church buildings and the religious artworks that beautify them are forms of worship themselves and both inspire and reflect the prayer of the community as well as the inner life of grace.

The Liturgy is the perfect expression of the Church, "the summit toward which all the Church's activity is directed" and the source of all her power. At the Eucharist, Christ calls us his members to conversion in the proclamation of the word; he invites us to join with him in offering his perfect sacrifice to the Father; he sends us forth from liturgy to serve the community in service.

In building a house for the Church that is also the house of God on earth, all the expressions of Christ's presence have prominence of place that reflects their proper nature. From the very beginning of the planning and design process, we will want to reflect upon the relationship of the ALTAR, the TABERNACLE, the CHAIR of the priest celebrant, and the SPACE for the congregation.

## **Liturgical Principles for Building or Renovating Churches**

The basic liturgical principles for designing or renovating churches today are drawn from the Second Vatican Council and the documents that implemented its decrees.

1. The Church building is designed in harmony with church laws and serves the needs of the liturgy because the Church is a house of prayer in which the Eucharist is celebrated and the Blessed Sacrament is reserved, a place where the faithful assemble, and a setting where Christ is worshiped, it should be worthy of prayer and sacred celebration, built in conformity with the laws of the Church, and dignified with noble beauty and intrinsically excellent art.
2. The church building fosters participation in the liturgy. The building itself can hinder or promote the "full, conscious, and active participation" of the faithful. Parishes making decisions about the design of a church must consider how the various aspects and choices they make will affect the ability of all members to participate fully in liturgical celebrations. Items for consideration: Placement of wheel chairs—Hearing Loop throughout church—Need for a ramp for access to Ambo and Altar—Better Lighting....etc.
3. The design of the church building reflects the various roles of the participants. Since the liturgical celebration is an action of Christ and the Church, it belongs to the whole Body of the Church. While all members are called to participate in worship, not all have the same role. The Holy Spirit calls members to various ministries today. Some serve as deacons, others as lectors, acolytes, extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion, cantors, musicians, ushers and sacristans. The design of the Church should reflect the unity of the entire assembly and at the same time ensure that each person is able to exercise his or her ministry in a space that accommodates the ritual action.
4. The church building reflects the culture of every time and place. Just as each local community is different, styles and forms of churches vary. The New Testament speaks of the upper room where Christ gathered the Apostles for the Last

Supper and appeared to them several times after the resurrection. After the Ascension, believers gathered in homes to celebrate the “breaking of the bread.” Such homes evolved into “house churches” and became the Christian community’s earliest places for worship. The rich history of Catholic worship space traces a path through every people and place where the liturgy has been offered. Since the Church is not wedded to a single architectural or artistic form, it seeks to engage the genius of every time and place, to craft the finest praise of God from what is available.

5. The fifth Principle is very simply stated: The Church building should be beautiful. The external and internal structure of the church building should be expressive of the dignified beauty of God’s holy people who gather there and of the sacred rites they celebrate. Liturgical art and architecture reflect and announce the presence of God who calls the community to worship and invite believers to raise their minds and hearts to the One who is the source of all beauty and truth. The Church’s great treasury of art and architecture helps it to transcend the limitations of any one culture, region, or period of time. The Church is not exclusively identified with the form of the past, but is ever open to embrace newer forms that have grown from her rich heritage of artistic expression. Great religious art fosters the life of prayer of contemporary assemblies who, while rooted in prior artistic traditions, hear God’s unceasing call to proclaim the reign of God in the languages of a particular time and place. The church building is a sign and reminder of the immanence and transcendence of God – who chose to dwell among us and whose presence cannot be contained or limited to any single place. “As visible constructions, churches are signs of the pilgrim church on earth; they are images that proclaim the heavenly Jerusalem, places in which are actualized the mystery of the communion between man and God.”~GIRM, no.68

### The Baptistry

The rites of Baptism, the first of the sacraments of initiation, require a prominent place for celebration. Initiation into the Church is entrance into a Eucharistic community united in Jesus Christ. Because the rites of initiation of the Church begin with Baptism and are completed by the reception of the Eucharist, the baptismal font and its location reflect the Christian’s journey through the waters of Baptism to the altar. This integral relationship between the baptismal font and the altar can be demonstrated in a variety of ways, such as placing the font and the altar on the same architectural axis, using the same floor patterns, and using common or similar materials and elements of design.

The location of the baptismal font, its design, and the materials used for its construction are important considerations in the planning and design of the building. Because of the relationship of Baptism to the celebration of the other sacraments, it is customary to locate the font near the entrance of the church where members pass regularly. Confirmation and Eucharist complete the initiation begun at Baptism; Marriage and Ordination are ways of living the life of faith begun in baptism; the Funeral of a Christian is the final journey of a life in Christ begun in Baptism; and the sacrament of Penance calls the faithful to conversion and to a renewal of their baptismal commitment. We see, then, the relationship between the various sacraments as well as the importance of the Eucharist within the life and faith development of the members.

The following criteria can be helpful when choosing the design for the font:

1. One font that will accommodate the baptism of both infants and adults symbolizes the one faith and one baptism that Christians share. The size and design of the font can facilitate the dignified celebration for all who are baptized at the one font.
2. The font should be large enough to supply ample water for the baptism of both adults and infants. Since baptism in Catholic churches may take place by immersion in the water, or by infusion (pouring), fonts that permit all forms of baptismal practice are encouraged.
3. Baptism is a sacrament of the whole Church and, in particular, of the local parish community. Therefore the ability of the congregation to participate in baptisms is an important consideration.
4. The location of the baptistry will determine how, and how actively, the entire liturgical assembly can participate in the rite of baptism.
5. Because of the essential relationship of baptism to the celebration of other sacraments and rituals, the parish will want to choose an area for the baptistry or the font that visually symbolizes that relationship. Some churches choose to place the baptistry and font near the entrance to the church. Placing the baptismal font in an area near the entrance or gathering space where the members pass regularly and setting it on an axis with the altar can symbolize the relationship between the various sacraments as well as the importance of the Eucharist within the life and faith development of the members.

## **The Church Building and the Sacred Rites Celebrated Within**

The church building houses the community of the baptized as it gathers to celebrate the sacred liturgy. The primary concern in the building or renovation of a space for worship must be its suitability for the celebration of the Eucharist and other liturgical rites of the Church. Besides providing a suitable place for the celebration of the liturgical rites, the church building also offers a place to which individuals may pray in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, or the faithful may gather for a rich variety of devotions expressive of the faith life of a given culture, region or ethnic community.

The celebration of the Eucharist is the center of the entire Christian life, both for the universal Church and for the local faith communities. The celebration of the Sunday Eucharist is the appropriate point for understanding the demands of space, sound and visibility made upon a church building. An analysis of these requirements will include attention to the place for the congregation, for the preaching of the Word, and for the celebration of the Liturgy of the Eucharist, with special care for the location of the ALTAR, the AMBO, and the CHAIRS for the priest celebrant and the deacon. In addition, special consideration should be given to the place for the reservation of the Blessed Sacrament.

Next week and in the following weeks we will consider the Congregational Area and the Sanctuary Area; also, the Altar, the Ambo and the Chair for the Priest Celebrant.

### **The Sanctuary Area**

The sanctuary is the space where the altar and ambo stand, and “where the priest, the deacon and other ministers exercise their offices.” The special character of the sanctuary is emphasized and enhanced by the distinctiveness of its design and furnishings, or by its elevation. The principal ritual furnishings within the sanctuary are the altar on which the Eucharistic sacrifice is offered, the ambo from which God’s word is proclaimed, and the chair of the priest celebrant.

### **The ALTAR**

Since the Church teaches that “the altar is Christ,” its composition should reflect the nobility, beauty, strength, and simplicity of the One it represents. The altar is the natural focal point of the sanctuary and it is to be “freestanding to allow the priest to walk around it easily; and Mass to be celebrated facing the people.” The shape and size should reflect the nature of the altar as the place of sacrifice and the table around which Christ gathers the community to nourish them. The altar should be centrally located in the sanctuary. It must be visible from all parts of the Church. Methods of elevation can be found that still allow access to the altar by ministers who need wheelchairs or who have other disabilities. The altar is “center of thanksgiving that the Eucharist accomplishes” and the point around which the other rites are in some manner arrayed.

### **The Ambo & Chair of the Celebrant**

The central focus of the area in which the Word of God is proclaimed during the liturgy is the Ambo. The design of the Ambo and its prominent placement reflects the dignity and nobility of the saving word and draws the attention of those present to the proclamation of the Word. The *General Introduction to the Lectionary* recommends that the design of the Altar and Ambo bear a “harmonious and close relationship” to one another in order to emphasize the close relationship between Word and Eucharist. Since many people share in the ministry of the Word, the Ambo should be accessible to everyone, including those with physical disabilities. Therefore, an access without steps, with the use of a ramp, will enable all to serve as celebrant and lector. Our reverence for the Word of God is expressed not only in attentive listening to and reflection upon the Scripture, but also by the way we handle and treat the Book of the Gospels.

The Chair of the priest celebrant stands “as a symbol of his office of presiding over the assembly and of directing prayer.” An appropriate placement of the Chair allows the priest celebrant to be visible to all the congregation. The Chair reflects the dignity of the one who leads the community in the person of Christ, but it never intended to be remote or grandiose. The seat for the deacon should be placed near that of the celebrant. The most appropriate place for the Chair is at the head of the sanctuary and turned toward the people. This Chair is not used by a lay person who presides at a service of the Word with Communion or a Sunday celebration in the absence of a priest. Other chairs may be placed in the sanctuary for extra priests concelebrants when necessary.

### **The Congregation’s Area (the NAVE)**

The space within the church building for the faithful other than the priest celebrant and the ministers is sometimes called

the *nave*. This area is not comparable to the audience's space in a theater or public arena because in the liturgical assembly, there is no audience. Rather, the entire congregation acts. "The People of God assembled at Mass possess an organic and hierarchical structure, expressed by the various ministries and actions for each part of the celebration. Thus it should also allow the participants to take the place most appropriate to them and assist all to carry out their individual functions properly."

~GIRM

Two principles guide architectural decisions about the form and arrangement of the nave:

- 1 – the community worships as a single body united in faith, not simply as individuals who happen to find themselves in one place, and the nature of the liturgy demands that the congregation as well as the priest celebrant and ministers be able to exercise their roles in a full and active way.
- 2 – the priest celebrant and ministers together with the congregation form the liturgical assembly, which is the Church gathered for worship.

The body of the church is not simply a series of unrelated sections. Rather, each part contributes to the unity of the space by proportion, size and shape. "According to tradition, churches are primarily places where the People of God gather and are made one as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are one, and are the church, the temple of God built with living stones, in which the Father is worshiped in spirit and truth."

### **The Place for the Pastoral Musicians**

Music is integral to the Liturgy. It unifies those gathered in worship, supports the song of the congregation, highlights significant parts of the liturgical action, and helps to set the tone for each celebration. It is important to recognize that the building must support the music and song of the entire worshiping community. In addition, "some members of the community have special gifts for leading the assembly in musical praise and thanksgiving." The skills and talents of these pastoral musicians, choirs, and instrumentalists are especially valued by the Church. Because the roles of the choirs and cantors are exercised within the liturgical community, the space chosen for the musicians should clearly express that they are part of the assembly of worshipers. In addition, cantors and song leaders need visual contact with the music director while they themselves are visible to the rest of the congregation.

The placement and prayerful decorum of the choir members can help the rest of the community to focus on the liturgical action taking place at the ambo, the altar, and the chair. The ministers of music are most appropriately located in a place where they are part of the assembly and have the ability to be heard. The placement of the choir should never crowd or overshadow the other ministers in the sanctuary nor should it distract from the liturgical action.

### **The Reservation of the Eucharist**

Christ present in the Eucharistic species is a treasure the Church has come to cherish and revere over the centuries. The reservation of the Eucharist was originally intended for the communion of the sick, for those unable to attend Sunday celebration, and as Viaticum for the dying. As the appreciation of Christ's presence in the Eucharistic species became more developed, Christians desired through prayer to show reverence for Christ's continuing presence in their midst. The Second Vatican Council led the Church to a fuller understanding of the relationship between the presence of the Lord in the liturgical celebration of the Eucharist and in the reserved sacrament. In reverent prayer before the Eucharist, the faithful give praise and thanksgiving to Christ for the priceless gift of redemption and for the spiritual food that sustains them in their daily lives. Providing a suitable place for the reservation of the Blessed Sacrament is a serious consideration in any building or renovation project.

The general law of the Church provides norms concerning the tabernacle and the place for reservation of the Eucharist. The tabernacle should be beautifully designed and in harmony with the overall décor of the rest of the church. To provide for safety of the Blessed Sacrament, the tabernacle should be solid, immovable and locked. A special lamp or candle burns continuously near the tabernacle as an indication of Christ's presence. It is not appropriate that the tabernacle be on the main altar. A special area can be designed within the sanctuary; however, it should not draw the attention of the faithful away from the Eucharistic Celebration and its components. The placement should allow for a focus on the tabernacle for those periods of private prayer outside the celebration of the Eucharist.

## The Gathering Space or Narthex

The Narthex is a place of welcome – a threshold between the congregation’s space and the outside environment. In the early day’s of the Church, it was a “waiting area” for catechumens and penitents. Today it serves as gathering space and as the entrance and exit to the building. The gathering space helps believers to make the transition from everyday life to the celebration of the liturgy, and after the liturgy, it helps them return to daily life to live out the mystery that has been celebrated. On occasion, the people gather in the narthex to move in procession and to prepare for the celebration of the liturgy.

## The Cross and Candles

The Cross with the image of Christ crucified is a reminder of the Paschal mystery. There should be a crucifix near the altar that is clearly visible to the people gathered there. The crucifix may be extended over the altar or affixed to the sanctuary wall. A processional cross of sufficient size is placed out of view of the congregation following the procession if there already is a cross in the sanctuary. Candles, which are signs of reverence and festivity, are to be used at every liturgical service. The living flame of the candle, symbolic of the risen Christ, reminds people that at Baptism they are brought out of darkness into God’s marvelous light. At least two candles are placed near the altar in the sanctuary area. Candles for liturgical use should be made of material that provides a living flame without being smoky or noxious. “To safeguard authenticity and the full symbolism of light,” electric lights as a substitute for candles are not permitted. The Paschal Candle is a symbol of the “light of Christ rising in glory”, scattering the “darkness of our hearts and minds.” The paschal candle should be a genuine candle. During the Easter Vigil and throughout the Easter Season, it belongs in the sanctuary. After the Easter season it is moved to a place of honor in the baptistery. During funerals it is placed near the coffin or ashes as a sign of the Christian’s Passover from death to life.

## **CONCLUSION – JOIN IN THE ADVENTURE!**

We have formed three subcommittees to begin to develop more detailed plans regarding the worship space enhancement. If you are interested in helping out, please contact the following individuals:

Art and Environment – Joan Kula

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Buildings and Grounds – Jim Totzke

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Communication and Promotion – Mark Mettelmann

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## **INSPIRATION**

St. Thomas More Parish Jubilee Prayer

*Gracious God, source of all life and holiness, fill us, your St. Thomas More Faith Community, with love, in joyful anticipation of our parish’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Touch our hearts with a spirit of thankfulness and generosity as we gather each week to receive your Word and be nourished with your Body and Blood. May St. Thomas More, our patron, intercede for us another 50 years, as we strengthen and beautify our church. May we continue to be a Spirit-filled community of love and service, working together to give you glory. We ask this through Jesus, who with the Father and the Holy Spirit, enfold us in your love, now and forever. Amen!*

*“I think that if any good thing shall go forward, something must be adventured.”*

*~St. Thomas More*