



A PLACE APART

Guidelines for Auxiliary Spaces that Serve the Liturgy

Introduction

We are a pilgrim people and a practical people. Both realities need to be incorporated into any church construction or renovation project. Our identity as a pilgrim church is expressed in our sacraments, welcoming rites, processions, dismissals and other sacred actions which find us traversing the walls of the church “nave” or the congregation’s area. Being a practical people means that church designers must consider the broad demands placed upon our facilities when people engage in the sacred liturgy.

The following statement focuses on the design of *auxiliary spaces for worship* regarding art, architecture and environment. These provisions should be studied in the light of the U.S. Bishops’ document, *Built of Living Stones*¹ and other documents cited herein.

The Gathering Space or Narthex

The gathering space² serves as a threshold between the ordinary and the sacred. Many liturgical rites originate at the doors of the church and pass through the narthex: catechumens and candidates are welcomed, the bride and groom are received, the casket is sprinkled and clothed, processions flow for Palm Sunday, the Easter Vigil, and the Presentation of the Lord.³ As a primary space for hospitality, the narthex also serves as the “village square” where parishioners bring goods for the needy, raffle tickets, and register for parish programs.

The gathering space needs to be spacious and accessible to the disabled, convenient to restrooms, a vesting area, and hospitable to families.

¹ United States Catholic Conference, *Built of Living Stones* [BLS] (2000).

² BLS, nos. 95-97.

³ See no. 48 in *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, nos. 82, 133, 159, 184 in *Rite of Christian Funerals*; no. 19 in the *Rite of Marriage*; see also the first form of the Procession for the “Commemoration of the Lord’s Entrance into Jerusalem,” and the Blessing of Candles and Procession” for the Presentation of the Lord in *The Sacramentary* (New York, Catholic Book Publishing, 1985)

The Place for Reconciliation

The Sacrament of Penance entails an especially poignant meeting between the repentant sinner and our merciful God. The reconciliation chapel ought to be designed as a holy space worthy of such an encounter. The room should be inviting and prayerful, afford privacy to the penitent and protection for the minister of the sacrament, and contain a fixed grille for face-to-face confession.”⁴ Ideally, the chapel’s entrance would be from the nave so penitents have a place to pray as they anticipate the sacrament, and to facilitate use of this room during communal penance services.

The physical arrangements for the reconciliation chapel are defined in the Diocesan Sacramental Policy Handbook⁵ indicating the need for accessibility for the disabled and distinguishing this place to be solely for the sacrament of penance. The design must take into account the safety of both priest and penitent. A separate entrance for the confessor is recommended.

Spaces for Worship or Prayer that Happen Apart from the Main Assembly

There are at least two situations when worshippers are dismissed from the main assembly to continue their worship or prayer: the first calls for catechumens to be dismissed after the homily, and to “remain together to share their joy and spiritual experiences,”⁶ the second allows for children to be dismissed to celebrate the Liturgy of the Word “in a separate, but not too distant room,” before they return to celebrate the eucharist with the adults.⁷ When a church is renovated or built, communities will want to ensure such spaces are provided near the primary worship space.

Accommodating Children

Children have a right to pray and praise alongside others in the assembly. **Parishes are discouraged from erecting separate “cry rooms.”** However, given the reality that infants and children are occasionally disruptive, each local community will need to consider the best manner to provide a place for parents to excuse themselves with their child if necessary. If a “quieting area” is deemed necessary, it would be designed so children and their parents can see, hear and participate in the liturgy. Direct access to the

⁴ See *Built of Living Stones*, § 103-105.

⁵ *Sacramental Handbook for the Diocese of Grand Rapids: Sacrament of Penance*, policy 603.

⁶ RCIA, no. 67 Historically, this area has been known as the “catechumenon” or “catechumenal atrium.”

⁷ *Directory for Masses with Children*, no. 17.

nave enables those who use this space to take their place with the main assembly when the child quiets down.

Work Areas for Ministers

Built of Living Stones provides rules for sacristies and the care and storage of sacred objects.

⁸ The Diocese of Grand Rapids mandates a *sacrarium*, the special sink used for the reverent disposal of sacred substances.⁹ Ample spaces ought to be provided where ushers/greeters, extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion, lectors, musicians, and other servants of the liturgy may gather and prepare/rehearse for their sacred duties.

Ongoing liturgical seasons necessitate work areas for plant care, flower arranging, banner storage, candle stands, and other tasks/environmental needs that are best accomplished outside the nave.

Liturgical Art and Spaces for Devotion

“Indeed, the veneration of sacred images belongs to the very nature of Catholic piety,” notes the Church’s *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy*.¹⁰ The directory and *Built of Living Stones* provide essential principles for such objects and areas. These documents describe the need for communities to seek beauty and cherish popular piety, while emphasizing the preeminence of the Eucharistic liturgy in the life of the community.¹¹

Every church should have an image of the Blessed Mother, an image of the patron of their parish, and if possible, St. Joseph. Other sacred images (statues, paintings, sculptures, etc) that reflect the devotional practice of the Church or express the cultural tradition(s) of the parish community are also appropriate. Parishes will wish to exercise great care in commissioning quality sacred art objects. As the *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy* explains, “The primary function of sacred images is not to evince aesthetic pleasure but to dispose towards Mystery.”¹²

Devotional areas, shrines and the like should be designed to encourage people to engage in prayer. **If a community has the custom of using votive lights, these devotional areas offer the most appropriate location.** Often, a worthy shrine can be temporary

⁸ See BLS, no. 234.

⁹ See BLS, no. 236.

¹⁰ *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy: Principles and Guidelines [DPPL]*, Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments: December, 2001, no. 243.

¹¹ See BLS, nos. 91, 45-47, 54, 130, 131; DPPL, nos. 4, 5, 18, 28-84, 239, 240, 243, 244.

¹² DPPL, no. 243.

and/or moveable. Examples of this might be the Christmas crèche, or a shrine created each November to commemorate the departed of the parish.

Other Spaces for Careful Consideration

Additional spaces that merit careful consideration include:

- the area for the Easter fire (and for outdoor assemblies)
- an area for wedding parties to prepare, and for the newly baptized to dress.¹³
- a space for music ministry rehearsal
- a place for funeral visitation and wakes
- secure area for the collection, as well as secure and fireproof storage area for sacred vessels
- access to utilities (mechanical room) and related storage.

Conclusion

These guidelines on auxiliary spaces wed liturgical knowledge and church law with the practical matters of building design. For further assistance, contact the Office for Worship for the Diocese of Grand Rapids.

¹³ See BLS No. 69-6.