

# BUILDING CHURCH

—*while building a church*—

## WORSHIP REQUIREMENTS ACTION TEAM REPORT

**W**e are called to build a community of faith, worship, and service to nourish generations of believers. To aid our quest, the Worship Requirements Action Team has researched the physical elements of a church that support and enhance our experience of God's presence through the Liturgy.

The design of these elements has been shaped by 2000 years of Church history and tradition. However, the symbolism of many of these elements has been reexamined in the years following the Second Vatican Council in an effort to return to our liturgical roots.

As we prayerfully consider the elements of our new church, we invite you on a tour, beginning with the elements of the Sanctuary. The Sanctuary includes the Altar, Ambo, Priest Presider's Chair and Tabernacle.

### The Altar

*"When the hour came, he took his place at table with the apostles."* Luke 22:14

The first Eucharist was celebrated at a table as part of a meal, and the earliest Christians held their liturgical celebrations in much the same way. As history moved along, the altar moved as well:

- During the persecution of the Church, the celebration moved to the catacombs, with martyrs' tombs serving as the table of sacrifice.
- During the middle ages, altar placement moved

into the space reserved for the clergy — ultimately to the back of the church, often fixed to the wall. This was accepted Church practice until...

- The Second Vatican Council. In 1963, the Council published a Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, and from this the United States Council of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) developed a set of guidelines for the building and renovation of the churches called *Built of Living Stones*.

**The USCCB guidelines tell us the altar is the point around which all other rites are arrayed.** These are the guidelines for the altar used in the reformed and restored liturgy today:

- It shall reflect nobility, beauty, strength and simplicity.
- The altar must be visible from all points of the church, but not elevated to the point that it is symbolically divided from the congregation. It should be fixed to the floor (not hanging, for example).
- The table (or mensa) should be of natural stone (although in the United States, at the Bishop's discretion, other worthy materials may be allowed).
- The pedestal or support may be fashioned from any material that is becoming and solid.
- The altar should be in proportion to the church, and it should be the center of attention. However, the USCCB does not specify a shape for the altar.



- The custom of placing small relics in an altar stone has changed; they are no longer to be set in the surface of the altar. Relics may be placed underneath the altar under certain conditions.

## The Ambo

*“He said to them, ‘Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature.’”*  
Mark 16:15

Of the two major parts of the Mass, the Liturgy of the Eucharist is celebrated at the altar — the point in the Sanctuary around which all other rites are arrayed — while the Liturgy of the Word is proclaimed at the ambo. (In early Christian churches, the “ambo” was one of two raised stands from which parts of the service were chanted or read.)

The Second Vatican Council’s directives included liturgical renewal in which greater emphasis is placed on the proclamation of the Word, which is reflected in how we design and place the ambo.

**The unity, balance and harmony we see between the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist is intended to be visible in the relationship of the altar to the ambo.** In the document *Built of Living Stones* the USCCB provides these guidelines:

- The ambo, as the table of the Word, should occupy the same Sanctuary space as the altar and be made of the same material, similar in design, and probably the work of the same designer.
- The dignity of the word of God requires a location suitable for the proclamation of the word, situated so the attention of the assembly is naturally and easily turned during the Liturgy of the Word.
- The ambo should be located so the ordained ministers and lectors may be clearly seen and easily heard by the assembly.
- The ambo should be stationary, and not a movable lectern.
- There should be ample space around the ambo

to allow a gospel procession to approach with a full complement of ministers bearing candles and incense.

- The ambo should be accessible for all who share in the ministry of the word, including those with physical disabilities.
- The ambo may be designed in such a way to display the Book of the Gospels or a copy of the Scriptures before and after the liturgical celebration.
- Only the readings, the Gospel, the responsorial Psalm and the Easter proclamation are to be proclaimed from the ambo, though it may also be used for giving the homily and for the Prayers of the Faithful.

## The Priest Presider’s Chair

*“For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”*  
Matthew 18:20

The chair for the priest presider deserves special attention in the design of worship space, but should not suggest domination of the assembly or remoteness from it.

It is not a throne, but instead displays the priest’s office: presiding over the gathered assembly and directing prayer. (The priest’s chair is not to be 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.) The priest presider’s chair is distinguished from other chairs by its design and placement, ensuring the presider is visible to all. All chairs in the sanctuary should be designed in harmony with the altar and ambo.

## The Tabernacle

*“And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as the Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth.”* John 1:14

Christ present in the eucharistic species is a treasure the Church has come to cherish over the centuries. The reservation of the Eucharist was originally intended for communion of the sick,

for those unable to attend Sunday Mass, and as Viaticum for the dying.

As the appreciation of Christ's presence in the eucharistic species became more developed, Christians desired to show reverence for Christ's continuing presence in their midst. For Catholics, eucharistic adoration has "a sound and firm foundation especially since faith in the real presence of the Lord has, as its natural consequence, the outward, public manifestation of that belief." Surely we see that here at Immaculate Conception in our sharing of Eucharistic Adoration Holy Hour on Tuesdays, especially accompanied by special intentions such as Building Church or world peace.

For our new worship space, guidelines from the *Code of Canon Law* and the revised *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* recommend that if a place of reservation is desired, it should be a space that is dedicated to Christ present in the Eucharist, designed so the attention of one praying is drawn to the tabernacle that houses the presence of the Lord.

- The Eucharist will be reserved in a part of the church that is prominent, conspicuous, beautifully decorated, and worthy of the Blessed Sacrament.
- To secure the Blessed Sacrament, the tabernacle shall be solid, immovable, opaque and locked, situated on a fixed pillar or stand, or attached/embedded in one of the walls
- A special oil lamp or wax candle (not electric) will burn continuously to indicate Christ's presence.
- The tabernacle should not be on the altar, but may be placed in the sanctuary apart from the altar of celebration or in a separate chapel suitable for adoration. To indicate a separation, architectural devices such as distance, lighting, or structural techniques may be used.
- The tabernacle should be fully visible to the entire worship area when the eucharistic liturgy is not being celebrated.

*As our tour continues, we move into the body of the church and examine the Baptismal Area, the Nave, and the significance of Sacred Oils and Sacred Images.*

## **The Baptismal Area**

*"On coming up out of the water he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him." Mark 1:10*

One of the focal points in entering a church is the place where Baptisms are celebrated. This is where an infant, child or adult may join the community of faith. In fact, Baptism is the sacrament in which we become children of God and receive the gift of sanctifying grace.

To speak of symbols and sacramental signification is to indicate that immersion is the fuller and more appropriate symbolic action in Baptism. Jesus was immersed in the Jordan River when he was baptized by St. John the Baptist. Immersion is not a new form, but an ancient one. Therefore, new Baptismal fonts should be constructed to allow for the immersion of infants, at least, and for the pouring of water over the entire body of a child or adult.

The place of the font, whether it is in an area near the main entrance of the liturgical space, or one in the midst of the assembly, should facilitate full congregational participation, and not only during baptismal rites. For example, if the Baptismal Area is located near the entrance of the church, there would not be small holy water fonts affixed to the walls near the doors. Instead, the assembly, when entering the church, would sign themselves with the holy water from the baptismal font. This more literal ritual action reminds one of his or her own baptism in Christ.

Another significance of the baptismal area is the funeral rite. We are baptized into Christ's death so we may rise again. A well-designed baptismal area would be able to accommodate the casket for these rites.

## The Nave

*"All who believed were together and had all things in common." Acts 2:44*

The Nave is defined as the worship space within the church building for the faithful, other than the priest celebrant. The Nave includes space shared by the assembly and the choir, and it should facilitate everyone's active participation in the Liturgy.

The space for the assembly should be arranged so that all are able to participate, both visually and spiritually, in the Mass and other sacred celebrations.

- **Pews and seats** should be arranged in a manner so that the parishioners are able not only to see and hear the priest, deacon or lectors, but also so they can easily come forward to receive Holy Communion.
- Seating should be constructed and arranged to give the feeling of **community and involvement**, and should avoid any resemblance of a theater or arena.
- It should also include an area specific to the needs of those in **wheelchairs or walkers**, preferably in the front or side of church so the view is not obstructed by the standing assembly.
- The **choir** should be arranged so that they are a part of the gathered community of the faithful, allowing full participation in the Mass. The seating should be constructed and arranged in a manner so that they are clearly a part of the assembly.

## Sacred Oils and Sacred Images

*"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." John 1:5*

**Sacred Oils:** The consecrated oil of chrism, as well as the blessed oils of the sick and of the catechumens, are traditionally housed in a special place called an ambry or repository. The style of the ambry may take different forms.

A church might choose a simple, dignified and secure niche in the baptistry or in the wall of

the sanctuary, or a small case for the oils. Since bright light and high temperatures can hasten spoilage, we will select a location that helps preserve the freshness of the oil.

**Sacred Images:** A tradition almost as old as the church itself, images may be found in stained glass windows, on wall frescoes and murals, and as statues or icons. Often they depict scenes from the bible or from the lives of the saints, and may be a source of instruction as well as devotion.

Good works of sacred art point to much more than can be seen. *Liturgical arts* relate to the sacraments of the church while *devotional arts* are designed to enrich our spiritual life.

Placement can be a challenge. Some parishes designate an area for the shrine image that is being venerated on a given day or for a period of time. It is important that images depict saints for whom a devotion currently exists in the parish, and desirable that a significant image of the patron of the church be displayed.

Art works truly belong when they enhance liturgical, devotional and contemplative prayer. Sculpture and artwork may express the wholeness, harmony and radiance of profound beauty.

A good image jolts our ordinary perceptions and inspires our imagination, allowing us to partake in the fullness of the Mystery of Jesus Christ.

---

### **Prepared by the Worship Requirements Action**

**Team:** Dave Haislar, Tina Grawitch, April Smith, Tina Drennan, Walter Novak, Pat Novak, Timothy Massey, John Waide

### **References:**

*Built of Living Stones*

*General Instruction of the Roman Missal*  
*Environment and Art in Catholic Worship*