
GUIDELINES
FOR THE BUILDING AND RENOVATING
OF CHURCH EDIFICES IN
THE DIOCESE OF CHARLESTON

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Introduction

In the Roman Catholic Church, among the several offices of bishops, foremost is the exercise of their office to sanctify. Bishops are the principal dispensers of the mysteries of God and moderators, promoters and custodians of the whole liturgical life of the Church committed to them (cf. canon 835, #1).

One duty clearly and pointedly laid upon the diocesan bishop within his office to sanctify is that of moderating the building and renovation of churches within his diocese. In fact, no church is to be built or renovated without the express written consent of the diocesan bishop (cf. canons 1215, 1216).

While canon law does not define the rites, which are to be observed in celebrating liturgical actions, leaving that, for the most part, to current liturgical norms, the Code devotes a whole section, Book IV, to “the Office of Sanctifying in the Church” (canons 834-1253); and it is in this book that the bishop and all the faithful receive the canonical requirements for ministers or recipients of sacraments or for proper times or places of celebration. Sacred Places in canon law include churches, oratories, chapels, shrines, altars, reliquaries, and cemeteries; and the canons governing those sacred places are (canons 1205-1243). The diocesan bishop has the responsibility to watch over these sacred places in his local church, in their erection, dedication, use and restoration. In fulfilling his obligation to the faithful in this important area, the diocesan bishop is to be guided primarily by what will serve the good of souls (canon 1215, #2).

The Parish Church

From early times in our Church, the name “church” has been given to that building in which the Christian community gathers to hear the word of God, to pray together, to celebrate the sacraments, and to participate in the Eucharist. It is presumed that this edifice called “church” is erected as a building destined for assembling the People of God and for carrying out primarily sacred functions (cf. *Ceremonials of Bishops*”, page 234).

It is important and helpful to recall how God Himself repeatedly called for a place dedicated for the public worship of His people, for the sacred liturgy.

In the Old Testament, God our Father entrusted King Solomon with the sacred task of building a house for his name (2 Samuel, 7:13), with details of the pattern of the temple given to Solomon by his father King David (1 Chronicles 28:11-21), together with the assurance that the leaders and the people themselves would help in all the work, eager to show their skill in every kind of craftsmanship.

In the New Testament, St. Paul, under the guidance of God the Holy Spirit gives minute instructions to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 11:17-34) about the celebration of the Lord's Supper, calling upon them not to confuse the place for celebrating the Eucharist with community activities.

In the Second Vatican Council, the church, under the guidance of the same Holy Spirit, in its very first document, "Sacrosanctum Concilium" (The constitution on the Sacred Liturgy Chapter VII, 128) dealt with the well-planned construction of sacred buildings, the shape and construction of altars, the nobility, placing and securing of the eucharistic tabernacle, the suitability and dignity of the baptismery, the proper ordering of sacred images.

The basic liturgical principles for designing and renovating churches today are drawn from the Second Vatican Council and the documents that implemented its decrees. (These include Sacrosanctum Concilium, The General Instruction of the Roman Missal 2000, The Rite of Dedication of a Church and an Altar, the ceremonial of Bishops, the various sacramental rituals, and the Code of Canon Law, "Built of Living Stones".) Even though the Church offers no universal blueprint or style for the design of a church, attention to the following principles will insure that from the beginning, the ritual requirements will receive the priority they deserve in the design process. (BLS 27)

The following guidelines are to be followed in the Diocese of Charleston in the construction of new church buildings and in the renovation of existing churches.

The Parish Church Outside

Our Catholic churches should be surrounded by attractive grounds and walks, with easy access even for the handicapped and ample parking. Classrooms, meeting rooms, social halls, kitchens, etc. ideally should not be attached to the church, except by covered walks, and never in a way that obstructs or obscures one's vision of the church. Outside the church on the grounds is an excellent place for a shrine dedicated to the parish's patron saint, especially when that saint is not the Blessed Mother. Also, a cross is the traditional sign of the Catholic Church. The church building, in any event, should be readily identified as Catholic and of noble simplicity.

The Parish Church Inside – Part I

A. The Sanctuary

The Sanctuary is the place of the altar, and therefore the most prominent part of the parish church. The sanctuary is not a stage for performances; on the contrary, it is the place reserved for the principal act of worship of our faith and Church with its liturgical ceremonies. **The special character of the sanctuary is emphasized and enhanced by the distinctiveness of its design and furnishings, or by its elevation. The sanctuary must be spacious enough to accommodate the full celebration of the various rituals of word and Eucharist with their accompanying movement, as well as those of the other sacraments celebrated there. (BLS 54)**

B. The Altar

The altar is a symbol of Christ, the holy table, the table of the Lord on which the sacrifice of the cross and the body and blood of Christ are made present, and around which People of God are called together to share in the mysteries of their salvation. **Since the Church teaches that, “the altar is Christ,” its composition should reflect the nobility, beauty, strength, and simplicity of the One it represents. (BLS 56)**

- 1. The altar is a natural focal point of the sanctuary and is to be “freestanding to allow the priest to walk around it easily and Mass to be celebrated facing the people.” (GIRM 299) In the Diocese of Charleston, the altar is to be centered in the sanctuary... The architectural design of the building should make it evident that the altar is the most important furnishing in the building.**
- 2. Ordinarily, it should be fixed and with a table or mensa made of natural stone, since it represents Christ Jesus, the Living Stone. (1 Peter 2:4)**
- 3. Although there is no specified size or shape for an altar, it should be in proportion to the Church. The shape and size should reflect the nature of the altar as a place of sacrifice and the table around which Christ gathers a community to nourish them. The mensa should be large enough to accommodate the priest, the deacon, and the acolytes who minister there and be able to hold the Roman Missal and the sacred vessels. The style of the altar should be in harmony with the other major furnishings in the sanctuary. (BLS 58)**

C. The Ambo

The ambo, sometimes call the pulpit, is the place from which the word of God is proclaimed by the ministers and is to be reserved for the readings, the responsorial psalm, the sequences, and the homily. Its position should be visible. **In new churches in the Diocese of Charleston, the altar is to be centered in the sanctuary with the ambo positioned to its right or left.** Its composition should be of suitable material, design and nobility, in harmony with the altar and the chair **of the priest celebrant.**

There is to be only one ambo. If a lectern is needed for the cantor, leader of song, commentator or leader of the announcements, a very simple lectern, in no way competing or conflicting with the ambo and placed for the necessary visibility and audibility, can be used. It is best that this lectern be temporary and not fixed. The priest celebrant and the deacons make announcements from the chair or ambo.

D. The Chair for the Priest Celebrant

The chair for 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 in the congregation. The chair reflects the dignity of the one who leads the community in the person of Christ, but is never intended to be remote or grandiose. The priest celebrant’s chair is distinguished from the seating for other ministers by its design and placement. “The seat for the deacon should be placed near that of the celebrant.” (BLS 63)**

“The most appropriate place for the chair is at the head of the sanctuary and turned toward the people, unless the design of the building or other circumstances (such as distance or the placement of the tabernacle) are an obstacle.” (GIRM 310)

E. The Baptismal Font

The baptismal font should be in a place of prominence and is to be constructed of material to harmonize with the dignity and beauty of the altar, ambo **and chair for the priest celebrant.** Because immersion is the fuller and more appropriate symbolic action in baptism, the font in new and renovated churches should be constructed to allow for the immersion of infants, at least, and to allow for the pouring of water over the entire body of a child or an adult. **In the design of new fonts, care should be taken to insure that the holy water drains into the ground.** There should be room for the Easter Candle and its stand near the font; and the ambry or repository for the Holy Oils ideally should be located nearby.

F. The Tabernacle

The tabernacle is the receptacle in which the Blessed Sacrament is reserved. It is to be immovable, made of solid and opaque materials, and locked so that the danger of profanation may be entirely avoided. The Most Holy Eucharist must be reserved in every parish church and in only one tabernacle in the church, unless for a grave cause, it is judged safer to reserve the Blessed Sacrament in another place, especially at night.

In new churches in the Diocese of Charleston, the Most Holy Eucharist is to be reserved in a tabernacle visible in the Sanctuary. It may be positioned to the side or centered in the sanctuary. In historic churches or churches frequented by many visitors, the pastor may petition the Bishop of Charleston for an exemption to have the tabernacle placed in a side chapel.

The Parish Church Inside – Part II

A. The Cross

The cross with the image of Christ crucified is a reminder of Christ's paschal mystery. It draws us into the mystery of suffering and makes tangible our belief that our suffering when united with the passion and death of Christ leads to redemption. There should be a crucifix "positioned either on the altar or near it, and ... clearly visible to the people gathered there." Since a crucifix placed on the altar and large enough to be seen by the congregation might well obstruct the view of the action taking place on the altar... (it) may be suspended over the altar or affixed to the sanctuary wall. A processional cross of sufficient size, place in a stand visible to the people following the entrance procession, is another option. (BLS 91)

B. The Daily Mass Chapel

Parish churches built to accommodate 500 plus persons are to include a chapel for the celebration of daily Eucharist and provide a sacred space for small funerals, weddings and prayer groups and so that the large church does not have to be heated or cooled for small assemblies. It is strongly recommended that these chapels not double as nurseries or cry rooms.

C. The Cry Room?

I would recommend that we discuss the use of cry rooms. Thoughts?

D. The Candles

Candles are to be used at every liturgical service as a sign of reverence and festivity. They are to be placed on or around the altar in a way suited to the design of the altar and the Sanctuary. Candles must not interfere with the faithful's clear view of what goes on at the altar. Only two candles are needed for the celebration of any Eucharist; but the number can be varied according to the seasons and feasts, and the solemnity of the celebration. All candles used in the celebration of the Eucharist and in any other liturgical rites are to be made of wax. The use of any other materials either as substitutes for or in imitation of candles is not permitted in our liturgy. Oil lamps may not be used.

The Easter Candle should have a place of prominence in the Sanctuary, either by the ambo or by the altar, during the Easter season. Subsequent to that, it should be placed in the baptistery. There should be only one Paschal Candle, and it should be of such stature as to be recognized by the faithful as symbolizing Christ, the Light of the Word, and recalling the Pillar of Fire, which guided at night the Children of Israel. It must be made of wax and renewed every year. There is to be no "permanent" Paschal Candle.

E. The Credence Table

The altar is never to be used as a table of convenience or as a resting place for cruets, books, **pontificalia**, or anything else. For such necessary items, credence tables are used, placed on either side of the sanctuary and convenient to the altar. These tables may be in the form of shelves attached to the Sanctuary wall. In material and form, they should harmonize with the other furnishings of the Sanctuary.

F. The Holy Oils

The pastor is to obtain the sacred oils from his own bishop and to keep them carefully in a fitting manner. The keeping of the oils in church in the traditional ambry remains appropriate but is not longer specified, canon law asking only for a diligent and becoming custody.

The repository for the holy oils should be in an ambry where they may be properly reserved and easily accessible. It should be located in the baptistery in churches that have one. In those without baptistery, the ambry should be located near the place where baptisms take place, since two of the three oils are used in the celebration of this sacrament. If this is not possible, some other appropriate place in the church should be chosen.

G. The Places of Reconciliation

The Code of Canon Law states that the proper place to hear sacramental confession is a church or an oratory, and that confessionals with a fixed grille between the penitent and confessor are to be located in an open area so that the faithful who wish to make use of them may do so freely. The bishops of the United States, upon invitation of the Code, issued the norm decreeing that rooms of reconciliation be provided in which penitents might choose to confess their sins and seek sacramental absolution through a face-to-face exchange with the priest, with the opportunity for appropriate spiritual counsel. In practice, the same space has been accommodated for both forms of confession, e.g., through a fixed grille or face-to-face. This reconciliation place should be for that purpose alone, and should not double as a vesting room, storage room, closet or part-time sacristy.

The canonical directive about the confessionals or “reconciliation rooms” being located in an open area so that the faithful who wish to make use of them may do so freely speaks to these areas being readily and easily available to the faithful. Accordingly, in the Diocese of Charleston, confessionals or reconciliation rooms in sufficient number are to be located in the nave of the church, in the rear, or on the sides, and, if appropriate, near the baptismal area. Provision should be made for access to reconciliation areas by the handicapped.

H. The Sacred Images

In its official Code of Canon Law, the Church states that the practice of displaying sacred images in the churches for the veneration of the faithful is to remain in force; they are to be exhibited in moderate number and in suitable order. Further, the Church recommends the particular and filial veneration of the Christian faithful to the Blessed Mary ever Virgin. There should not be more than one image of any particular saint in the same church.

In the Diocese of Charleston, it is firmly recommended that in every parish church a suitable place be afforded for displaying of the sacred image of the Mother of God.

I. The Choir

In its Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, the Church clearly states that the faithful should be encouraged to take part in the sacred liturgy by means of acclamations, responses, psalms, antiphons, and hymns. Bishops and other pastors of souls are admonished to take great care to ensure that whenever the sacred action is to be accompanied by chant, the whole body of the faithful may be able to contribute that active participation which is rightly theirs.

The choir exercises its own liturgical function within the assembly, carrying out the parts proper to it, and encouraging and supporting active participation of the congregation in its singing. What is said about the choir applies in a similar way to instrumentalists, especially the organist. In the Diocese of Charleston, the choir should be located in a position outside the Sanctuary so as to avoid this being a focal point for the congregation, and thereby reinforcing the choir's role of supporting the congregation in its singing.

The cantor and the leader of song are to lead and sustain the people in their singing from the Sanctuary or the front of the nave, not from the ambo, but from a lectern, if necessary or useful. The psalmody, however, since it is a proclamation of sacred scripture, should be led from the ambo.

J. The Narthex or Vestibule

The narthex or vestibule is one of the main divisions of the church, and consequently it should not be wanting. It has many important uses, both liturgical and practical. It is here that processions are formed, wedding groups are assembled, the body of the deceased greeted. It is the place for holy water fonts and announcement boards; and it serves as a shelter from inclement weather and a preparatory area before entering church or leaving it. It is to be located just beyond the main exterior doors of the church and just before the doors leading into the nave.

K. The Vesting Room

A vesting room or sacristy should be located to favor the procession of cross, candles, books and ministers through the midst of the congregation to the sanctuary and altar area. It is ideally situated at the rear and outside the nave of the church and accessible to the narthex for the forming of the aforementioned processions. It should contain a vestment case and vestment closet, a case for the liturgical books, a bulletin board, a lavatory, at least one chair, a crucifix and the title card containing the name of the church, and the names of the incumbent Pope and diocesan bishop. The door to and from this vesting room should be provided with a secure lock.

L. Sacristies

In front of the church building, behind the sanctuary or to either side or both sides of the Sanctuary, are usually located one or two sacristies. Where there are two of these forward sacristies, the one is reserved for the sacristan or sexton where he supervises storage and care of the sacred vessels and linens used at Mass and other rites, as well as seasonal and extra Mass and sacramental vestments, hosts, wine, liturgical books not used at regular or frequent ceremonies, priedieux and chairs. The other sacristy is for the altar servers and the other ministers. It is here that are kept the cassocks and surplices, processional crosses and candles, thurible and incense boat, charcoal and incense, holy

water vessel and sprinkler, extra candles and the like. At least one of these sacristies should be equipped with a lavatory, and should contain a sink for handling flowers and plants.

M. The Other Facilities

The proper planning of a church and its surroundings requires attention to whatever is needed for the convenience and comfort of the people that are usual in places of public gatherings. This would include provision for the hearing impaired, handicapped, storage areas for supplies, and rest rooms.

The Parish Church Inside – Part III

A. The Nave

This is the main body of the church, the central open space of the church between the Sanctuary and the narthex or vestibule. It is the proper place for the congregation and should be suited to the celebration of the Liturgy in such a way as to ensure the active participation of the faithful, enabling them to carry out their individual functions properly. There is no audience, no passive element in the liturgy and the most powerful experience of the sacred is found in the celebration of persons celebrating; that is, it is found in the action of the assembly. The nave of the church must make this possible.

B. The Aisles

There should always be a center aisle in the nave of every parish church. In addition, there may be two or more side aisles. The center aisle is usually wider than the side aisles; nonetheless, all aisles should be wide enough to provide comfortable passage to seats and for processions, keeping safety code regulations in mind. It is helpful to have an extended or a broader section at the top of the center aisle to accommodate the turning of a casket at funerals and for easy passage by the casket.

C. The Seats and Kneelers

There are to be seats and kneelers for the congregation in the nave of every parish church. It is very important to have adequate space between the rows of seats. Kneelers are to be provided of the right width and height above the floor, and they should be padded.

When a church is in the form of a circle, ellipse, shell, fan and the like, care must be taken that seating not be so located in the areas to the left and right of the ambo and altar as to make it difficult or impossible for the homilist or celebrant to have proper and easy contact with the congregation. The homilist, in particular, should not have to whirl from

north to south to preach to the people.

D. The Stations of the Cross

The practice of having the Stations of the Cross in parish churches is to be retained, this in accordance with the provisions of canon 1188 and the dispositions in the Roman Ritual's "Book of Blessings" for the erection and blessing of the Stations. Whether the Stations consist of images with crosses or simply of crosses, they should be set up in the nave in a manner convenient for the faithful.

E. Stained Glass Windows

Stained glass windows in churches are encouraged and, when used, should be in accordance with the norms of genuine religious art and not distracting from current renewed emphasis on the action of the assembly. When the stained glass windows depict images of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Blessed Virgin Mary, or the saints, these windows may be blessed with the formulae found in the "Book of Blessings" for the blessings of images for public veneration by the faithful.

Conclusion

The Catholic Church of Charleston in the State of South Carolina needs to be Catholic in its sacred edifices called "churches". These special sacred buildings must eloquently and accurately say what this 3.26 percent of the total population of the Palmetto State believes through its worship: lex orandi est lex credendi. We are a sacramental people, a people of outward signs bespeaking our inner relationship to the Lord and to each other. These signs must be authentically Catholic. Our church edifices must openly, obviously, reverently, artistically say this is a Roman Catholic Church of the Diocese of Charleston in the State of South Carolina. Hence, these guidelines.