



Guidelines on the Building and Restoration of Church Edifices

A. Introduction

In the Catholic Church, the Bishop is the moderator, promoter and custodian of the whole liturgical life of the Church committed to him (cf. canon 835, 1). One duty clearly laid upon the diocesan Bishop within his office to sanctify is that of moderating the building and restoration 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).

B. The Parish Church

From early times, 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, above all, to participate in the Eucharist. At the Second Vatican Council, the Fathers 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 baptistery, the proper ordering of sacred images. (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 128)

The basic liturgical principles for designing and renovating churches today are drawn from the documents of the Second Vatican Council and the documents that implemented its decrees: *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the Third 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. Even though the Church offers no universal blueprint for the design of a church building, attention to the following principles ensures that from the beginning, the ritual requirements of the Sacred Liturgy will receive the priority they deserve in the design process.

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

C. The Parish Church - External

Our Catholic churches should be surrounded by attractive grounds and walks, with easy access for the handicapped, and provide ample parking. Classrooms, meeting rooms, social halls, kitchens, etc. should ordinarily not be attached to the church, except by covered walks, and never in a way that obscures the vision of the church. A cross is the traditional sign of the Catholic church and should be visible. The church building, in any event, is to be readily identified as Catholic and of noble simplicity.



D. The Parish Church – Internal Features

Sanctuary

The sanctuary is the place of the altar, and therefore the most prominent part of the church. The sanctuary is not a stage for performances. On the contrary, it is the place reserved for the Church's principal act of worship with its liturgical ceremonies. The special character of the sanctuary is emphasized and enhanced by the distinctiveness of its design and furnishings and/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.

Altar

The altar is a symbol of Christ, the holy 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 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.

- a. The altar is a natural focal point of the sanctuary and is, "to allow the priest to walk around it easily" (GIRM, 299). The altar should 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.
- b. Ordinarily, the altar should be fixed and with a table or mensa made of natural stone or other worthy material, since it represents Christ Jesus, the Living Stone (cf. 1 Peter 2:4).
- c. Although there is no specified size or shape for the altar, it should be in proportion to the church. 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.
- d. The practice of placing relics of Saints under the altar to be dedicated is to be retained and encouraged (cf. GIRM, 302).

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.



The tabernacle is to be located in an elevated position in the sanctuary of the church, along the central axis behind the main altar (“Norms for the Placement of the Tabernacle in the Parish Churches of the Archdiocese of Vancouver” - January 12, 2010).

Ambo

The ambo, sometimes called the lectern or pulpit, is the place from which the Word of God is proclaimed by the ministers and is to be reserved for the scriptural readings, the responsorial psalm, the sequence, and the homily. Its position should be visible. The altar is to be centered in the sanctuary with the ambo positioned to its left, when seen from the congregation in the nave. 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 reader of the announcements, a simple lectern can be used. The lectern should not aesthetically compete or conflict with the ambo, and be placed for the necessary visibility and audibility. It should be temporary and not fixed.

Nave

This is the main body of the church, the central open space 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.

Aisles

There should always be a centre aisle in the nave of every parish church. In addition, there may be two or more side aisles. The centre 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.

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. 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.



Seats and Kneelers

There are to be seats (generally pews) 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 of the right width and height above the floor are to be provided, and they should be padded. 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 contact with the congregation.

“Crying Room”

Every church should include a room that is easily accessible for families with small children who, due to circumstances, may be better served in a separate space that is sound-proofed from the rest of the church. This room should be designed to provide an ample view of the sanctuary, and include a good sound system.

Confessionals

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 (cf. canon, 964, 2). It is preferable that a secondary access be available for the confessor/priest. In accordance with the Code, if a room is used as a confessional, it should provide penitents the option of confessing their sins and seeking sacramental absolution through a face-to-face exchange with the priest, provided that there is appropriate separation between priest and penitent. In practice, the same space must accommodate both forms of confession, (e.g., through a fixed grille or face-to-face).

Confessionals 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.

Organ and Choir

The organ and choir should be located in a position outside the sanctuary so as to avoid being a focal point for the congregation.

Narthex or Vestibule

The narthex or vestibule is one of the main divisions of the church, and has many important uses, both liturgical and practical. It is here that processions are formed, wedding groups are assembled and the body of the deceased greeted. It is the usual place for holy water fonts and announcement boards; and it serves as a shelter from inclement weather and as a preparatory area before entering or leaving church. It is to be located just beyond the main exterior doors of the church and just before the doors leading into the nave.



Vesting Room

A vesting room or sacristy should be located to favour the procession of cross, candles, books and ministers through the midst of the congregation to the sanctuary and altar area. Ideally it is situated at the rear and outside the nave of the church and is accessible to the narthex for the forming of processions. It should contain a vestment case and vestment closet and a lavatory.

Sacristy

In front of the church building, behind the sanctuary or to either side or both sides of the sanctuary, are located one or more sacristies. Where there are two of these forward sacristies, the one is reserved for the sacristan where he or she supervises storage and care of everything used at Mass and other rites. The other sacristy is for the altar servers and other ministers. Here are kept the cassocks and surplices and/or albs. At least one of these sacristies should be equipped with a sacrarium, a lavatory, and a sink for handling flowers and plants.

Other Facilities and General Access

All churches must follow local building requirements consistent with buildings that are for general public use and access. Local building codes will require for public assembly facilities a minimum requirement for men's and women's washrooms that will relate to the size and capacity of the church. Accommodation must always be made so that persons with disabilities, and/or require wheel-chair use, can fully and easily access all church facilities. Design must also make provision for the hearing impaired, and adequate storage areas.

E. Conclusion

Parishes of the Archdiocese of Vancouver need to be clearly identified as Catholic in their sacred edifices called "churches." These special sacred buildings must eloquently and accurately say to all people what the Catholic Church 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 one another. These signs must be recognisably Catholic. Our church edifices, therefore, must openly, obviously, reverently, artistically say this is a Catholic Church of the Archdiocese of Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.