

Built of Living Stones: Art, Architecture, and Worship

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The Baptistry

§ 66 § The rites of baptism, the first of the sacraments of initiation, require a prominent place for celebration.⁸⁹ 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 altar on the same architectural axis, using natural or artificial lighting, using the same floor patterns, and using common or similar materials and elements of design.

§ 67 § 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. It is customary to locate the baptismal font either in a special area within the main body of the church or in a separate baptistry. Through the waters of baptism the faithful enter the life of Christ.⁹⁰ For this reason the font should be visible and accessible to all who enter the church building. While the baptistry is proportioned to the building itself and should be able to hold a good number of people, its actual size will be determined by the needs of the local community.

§ 68 § Water is the key symbol of baptism and the focal point of the font. In this water believers die to sin and are reborn to new life in Christ. In designing the font and the iconography in the baptismal area, the parish will want to consider the traditional symbolism that has been the inspiration for the font's design throughout history. The font is a symbol of both tomb and womb; its power is the power of the triumphant cross; and baptism sets the Christian on the path to the life that will never end, the "eighth day" of eternity where Christ's reign of peace and justice is celebrated.

§ 69 § 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.⁹¹
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. Confirmation and the 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 that began in baptism; and the sacrament of penance calls the faithful to conversion and to a renewal of their baptismal commitment. 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.
6. *With the restoration of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults that culminates in baptism at the Easter Vigil, churches need private spaces where the newly baptized can go immediately after their baptism to be clothed in their white garments and to prepare for the completion of initiation in the Eucharist.* In some instances, nearby sacristies can serve this purpose.

The Location of the Tabernacle:

§ 74 § There is a number of possible spaces suitable for eucharistic reservation. The revised *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* states that it is more appropriate that the tabernacle in which the "Blessed Sacrament is reserved not be on the altar on which Mass is celebrated."[98](#) The bishop is to determine where the tabernacle will be placed and to give further direction. The bishop may decide that the tabernacle be placed in the sanctuary apart from the altar of celebration or in a separate chapel suitable for adoration and for the private prayer of the faithful. In making his determination, the bishop will consider the importance of the assembly's ability to focus on the eucharistic action, the piety of the people, and the custom of the area.[99](#) The location also should allow for easy access by people in wheelchairs and by those who have other disabilities.

The Tabernacle in the Sanctuary

§ 79 § A special area can be designed within the sanctuary. Careful planning is needed so that the placement chosen does not draw the attention of the faithful away from the eucharistic celebration and its components.[102](#) In addition, the placement must allow for a focus on the tabernacle for those periods of quiet prayer outside the celebration of the Eucharist.

§ 80 § Ordinarily, it is helpful to have a sufficient distance to separate the tabernacle and the altar. When a tabernacle is located directly behind the altar, consideration should be given to using distance, lighting, or some other architectural device that separates the tabernacle and reservation area during Mass, but that allows the tabernacle to be fully visible to the entire worship area when the eucharistic liturgy is not being celebrated.

The Space for the Reservation of the Blessed Sacrament

§ 248 § In most churches built before 1969, the tabernacle was situated on the main altar. At the close of the Second Vatican Council, when parishes were able to celebrate the liturgy facing the congregation, many pastors installed movable altars somewhere in front of the existing altar, and they used the former altar as the place for the reservation of the Blessed Sacrament.

§ 249 § In renovating a church designed in another time period, a parish has an opportunity to consider other locations for the tabernacle. Care must be taken to ensure that the area set aside for the reservation of the Eucharist is worthy and distinguished. The place for eucharistic reservation and its furnishings should never be temporary, makeshift, or difficult to find.

§ 250 § In some renovated churches it is possible to remove older altars and tabernacles. When there are good reasons for not removing the altar, an alternate site for the tabernacle may still be considered. In some churches an area that previously housed a side altar or some devotional space might be an appropriate space for reservation, assuming that it meets the other requirements set forth in the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*. In other situations, the only appropriate place for reservation will be in the sanctuary itself and on the former main altar. In these instances, a balance must be sought so that the placement of the tabernacle does not draw the attention of the faithful away from the eucharistic celebration and its components.²⁰⁴ On the other hand, the location must provide for a focus on the tabernacle during those periods of quiet prayer outside the celebration of the Eucharist.

§ 251 § Ordinarily, there should be a sufficient distance to separate the tabernacle and the altar. When a tabernacle is located directly behind the altar, consideration should be given to using distance, lighting, or some other architectural device that separates the tabernacle and reservation area during Mass but that allows the tabernacle to be fully visible to the entire worship area when the eucharistic liturgy is not being celebrated.

The Altar

§ 56 § At the Eucharist, the liturgical assembly celebrates the ritual sacrificial meal that recalls and makes present Christ's life, death, and resurrection, proclaiming "the death of the Lord until he comes."⁷⁰ The altar is "the center of thanksgiving that the Eucharist accomplishes"⁷¹ and the point around which the other rites are in some manner arrayed.⁷² Since the Church teaches that "the altar is Christ,"⁷³ its composition should reflect the nobility, beauty, strength, and simplicity of the One it represents. In new churches there is to be only one altar so that it "signifies to the assembly of the faithful one Christ and the one Eucharist of the Church."⁷⁴

§ 57 § The altar is the 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."⁷⁵ Ordinarily, it should be fixed (with the base affixed to the floor) and with a table or mensa made of natural stone,⁷⁶ since it represents Christ Jesus, the Living Stone (1 Pt 2:4). The pedestal or support for the table may be fashioned from "any sort of material, as long as it is becoming and solid."⁷⁷ In the United States it is permissible to use materials other than natural stone for a fixed altar, provided these materials are worthy, solid, properly constructed, and subject to the further

judgment of the local ordinary.⁷⁸ Parishes building new churches must follow the directives of the diocesan bishop regarding the kind of altar chosen and suitable materials for new altars.

§ 60 § In the Church's history and tradition, the altar was often placed over the tombs of the saints or the relics of saints were deposited beneath the altar. The presence of relics of saints in the altar provides a witness to the Church's belief that the Eucharist celebrated on the altar is the source of the grace that won sanctity for the saints.⁷⁹ The custom of placing small relics of martyrs or other saints in an altar stone and setting this in the mensa has changed since the Second Vatican Council. Relics of martyrs or other saints may be placed *beneath* the altar, as long as the relics are of a size sufficient for them to be recognizable as parts of a human body and that they are of undoubted authenticity. Relics are no longer placed *on* the altar or set into the mensa in an altar stone.⁸⁰

The Ambo

§ 61 § 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 that saving word and draws the attention of those present to the proclamation of the word.⁸¹ Here the Christian community encounters the living Lord in the word of God and prepares itself for the "breaking of the bread" and the mission to live the word that will be proclaimed. An ample area around the ambo is needed to allow a Gospel procession with a full complement of ministers bearing candles and incense. The *Introduction to the Lectionary* recommends that the design of altar and ambo bear an "harmonious and close relationship" to one another⁸² 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.⁸³

§ 62 § Our reverence for the word of God is expressed not only in an attentive listening to and reflection upon the Scripture, but also by the way we handle and treat the Book of the Gospels. The ambo can be designed not only for reading and preaching, but also for displaying the open Book of the Gospels or a copy of the Scriptures before and after the liturgical celebration.⁸⁴