



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. Code of Canon Law, c. 835 §1). One duty clearly laid upon the diocesan Bishop within his office to sanctify is that of overseeing 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. cc. 1215, 1216).

B. The Parish Church

From the early days of Christianity, 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 tabernacle, the suitability and dignity of the baptistery, and the proper ordering of sacred images. (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 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 (GIRM, 2008), the Order of the Dedication of a Church and an Altar, the Ceremonial of Bishops, the various sacramental rituals and the Code of Canon Law. While the Church offers no universal blueprint for the design of a church building, attention to the following principles ensures that 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 chapels for public worship and in the renovation of existing churches and chapels.

C. The Parish Church - External

Our Catholic churches should be surrounded by attractive grounds and walks, with easy access for the disabled, 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 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, the celebration of Holy Mass, and other liturgical ceremonies. The special character of the sanctuary is emphasized and enhanced by the distinctiveness of its design and furnishings. The sanctuary must be spacious enough to accommodate the full celebration of the various rituals of the Word and the 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 the People of God are called together to share in the mysteries of salvation. Since the Church teaches that the "altar represents 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 must allow the priest "to walk around it easily" (GIRM, n. 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 and assisting deacon(s) 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 authentic relics of Saints under the altar to be dedicated is to be retained (cf. GIRM, n. 302).

Tabernacle

The tabernacle is the receptacle where 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 avoided. The Holy Eucharist must be reserved in every parish church and in only one tabernacle in the church, unless there is a separate Adoration Chapel.

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. It is to be reserved for the scriptural readings, the responsorial psalm, the sequence, the Gospel, and the homily. It is positioned in the sanctuary to the left of the altar, when seen from the congregation in the nave, and should be visible from everywhere in the church. Its composition should be of suitable material, design and nobility, in harmony with the altar and the chair of the 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, observing all safety code regulations. 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 of the celebrant. There should be room near the font for the Easter candle and its stand; ideally, the ambry or repository for the holy oils 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 eye contact with the congregation.



“Crying Room”

Every church should include a room that is easily accessible for families with small children who, due to their circumstances, may be better served in a separate space that is soundproofed 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 confessionals with a fixed grille between the penitent and confessor are to be located in such a way that the faithful who wish to make use of them may do so freely (cf. c. 964 §2). It is necessary that a secondary access be available for the confessor. 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. Provision should be made for access to reconciliation areas by the handicapped.

Organ and Choir

The organ and choir must 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 both liturgical and practical uses. 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 for public assembly facilities will have minimum requirements for men's and women's washrooms in relation 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. The design must also make provision for the hearing impaired and for adequate storage areas.

E. Conclusion

Parishes of the Archdiocese of Vancouver must be clearly identified as Catholic and must eloquently express to all people the significance the Catholic Church places on divine worship. 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.

Approved: Saint Joseph the Worker
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**The following policy is hereby superseded:
Building and Restoration of Church Edifices issued on March 24, 2010**



Appendix I: Technical Design Guidelines for Churches and Chapels

These technical guidelines support the *Guidelines on the Building and Restoration of Church Edifices*. Where discrepancies, conflicts or gaps exist, the designer is to make a Request for Information to the Archdiocesan Liturgical Commission for resolution or determination. It is not intended that all churches be identical; each will have its own character reflective of the community as well as its size and context. All dimensions provided here are to be considered minimums and all commentary is meant to be informative.

Pastors are to confirm design direction early in the process as final approval for the design of any church or chapel is given by the Archbishop, in consultation with the Liturgical Commission and Sacred Art Sub-Committee.

The Parish Church – External

Consideration should be given to drop-offs for weddings and funerals (including moving caskets).

Consideration should be given to providing covered exterior areas for congregating and socializing after Mass. Additionally, careful consideration should be given to provide close and convenient access from the church to the Parish Hall or Pastoral Center for after-Mass gatherings (anecdote: “You will lose half of the people in a group every time you ask them to turn direction, so make convenient wayfinding!”).

For security, utilize CPTED (Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design) principles. All windows and exterior doors should have laminated glass vision panels. Provide fully monitored intrusion/fire/CO and camera monitoring security system to all doors, windows, and rooms. Coverage to include parking areas and yards. Consider additional conduits with pull-strings for futureproofing.

Narthex (Vestibule)

The narthex is a transition space that separates the ordinary from the sacred. It is a place of welcome that helps believers transition from everyday life to the celebration of the liturgy. After the liturgy, it helps them return to daily life to live out the mystery that has been celebrated. It also aids in keeping the nave reverent.

Aside from the efficient and safe movement of people, consideration should be given for the setting up of information tables, bulletin boards, umbrella stands, and offertory (votive) candles with prie-dieus.

Nave

a. Holy Water

Used to remind us of our Baptism, holy water is placed in a stoup or font at each entry and exit door. If using a single stoup, it should be placed centrally. Consideration should be given to the procession of caskets and the exit of the congregation.



b. Pews

Test to ensure there is sufficient space for kneeling in the pews. Kneelers are to be hinged, fitted with rubber bumpers/pads and upholstered with medium-hard density foam or soft neoprene (anecdote: if pews are too tight or kneelers are too uncomfortable, then people won't use them). Pews with kneelers can be omitted where impractical (e.g., hospital chapel or seniors' home). In this case, it is encouraged to have a few chairs with kneelers for those who are sufficiently ambulatory to use them.

c. Aisles

Center aisles to be 8'-0" minimum (9'-0" recommended) (6'-6" in chapels); Side aisles to be 5'-0" minimum (6'-0" recommended) (3'-8" in chapels); side aisles can be reduced if wheelchairs are in front pews.

Provide a minimum of 9'-0" from first pew to sanctuary step (5'-0" in chapels)

If raked seating is provided, grade should not exceed 2.5% slope.

Sanctuary

Whenever possible, the sanctuary should be on the east side of the nave, opposite the entrance.

The sanctuary should be elevated from the nave a minimum of one riser.

a. Altar

The minimum dimensions to be considered are 6'-0"L (4'-6" in chapels) x 2'-6"W x 3'-3"H, fixed down and centered in the sanctuary and main aisle.

b. Tabernacle

To be 3'-6" high. If on a table, it should have smaller LxW dimensions so that it remains in proper hierarchy, be fixed down and located centrally in the Sanctuary and on axis with the main aisle. The location of the tabernacle should be "marked" by the presence of an oil or wax candle sanctuary lamp. Electric lamps are prohibited.

c. Ambo (Lectern, Pulpit)

Locate a minimum of 4'-0" to the left of the altar as viewed from the pews. Surface should be large enough to comfortably support the lectionary. Consider location of microphone and space underneath to store lectionary, pastor's homily, announcements, lighter, candle snuffer and retractable step (for children using the ambo).

d. Presider's Chairs

Provide on the right of the altar as viewed from the pews. Should be visible from all parts of the nave. Benches for altar servers can be on either side.

e. Credence Tables

Locate 16"x30" tables in the sanctuary.



f. Crucifix

Size, type and materials to be complementary and in proportion to the sanctuary and Nave.

Provide 4'-6" (minimum) between the tabernacle and altar; 5'-0" (minimum) in front of the altar (4'-0" in chapels);

Provide adequate space for candles, processional cross, flowers, Christmas trees, advent wreath, and crèche. Consider providing discrete power supply for decorations (to prevent unsightly extension cords).

Consider inclusion (or future addition) of communion rail with padded kneelers.

Sacristy

a. Sacrarium

Used for the reverent disposal of sacred substances, a sacrarium is to be provided whenever possible. It is a small 12" sink with hinged lid that is piped directly to a rock pit in the earth. It does not have a faucet and is not connected to municipal or septic sewers. Drainage from other sources is not to be combined. If a sacrarium is not provided, then a clear disposal procedure is to be developed, approved by the Liturgical Committee and posted.

b. Sink

Provide a single bowl sink with gooseneck faucet for cleaning and filling of vases, fonts and vessels.

c. Millwork

Provide a minimum of one 4'-0" wide x 5-shelf bookcase. Provide minimum of 4'-6" clear counterspace with banks of drawers and cabinets underneath, upper cupboards to have open and adjustable shelving and under-counter lighting. Provide cylinder locks for all cabinets (cabinet for temporary storage of offertory collections to be keyed separately). Consider appropriate requirements for storage of the processional cross, monstrance, thurible, vessels, linens, unconsecrated hosts, etc. No storage is to be permitted atop the cabinets.

d. Vestments

Provide minimum of 8'-0" wide x 2'-3" deep closet (5'-0" wide in chapels) with heavy duty rod and interim supports for vestments. Provide separate 3'-0" wide closet for altar server albs and cinctures. Provide coat hooks for altar server jackets. Consider providing sturdy 3" hooks for vestment garment bags for visiting priests or the Archbishop.



e. Powder Room

Provide a 2-piece washroom with 36" high counter and dual-flush HC toilet with elongated bowl. Include a handicapped grab bar for convenience.

Reconciliation Space (Confessionals)

Reconciliation space should be located within, and accessed from, the nave of the church. The reconciliation space should be accessible for all persons with sufficient size to accommodate the necessary furnishings for penitent and confessor.

It should contain a kneeler and screen or fixed grille to ensure the option of anonymity for all penitents; but may also allow for face-to-face confessions for those who wish to do so. If face-to-face, then a physical 3'-6" high barrier with separate entries must be in place.

The space should be soundproof with partitions and/or sound masking technology (such as white noise or a fan) to achieve a STC-52 rating. When the penitent is present, there should be a "occupied" sign or light system.

Lighting should be warm and inviting. Consideration for braille signage or amplification for those with hearing disabilities is encouraged but should not compromise the confidential nature of the Sacrament.

Sacred art that expresses the gift of God's mercy, a crucifix symbolic of Christ's victory over sin and death, and icons or images reflective of Baptism and the Eucharist should be considered to enhance the atmosphere of prayer.

Choir

Music ministry is an integral part of the liturgy; churches and chapels are to have a dedicated space. The choir (including musical instruments and hymn list board) are not to be located in the sanctuary or detract from the importance of the altar. The choir is to be seen as a part of the congregation. The stand for the song leader is to be distinct from the ambo.

"Crying Room" (Family Room)

Churches are to provide space for families, sized proportionally to the congregation and with direct view of the sanctuary such that it feels part of the celebration of the Liturgy. Walls to meet STC-48, windows to be double glazed and have audio speakers with volume control. Consider providing lower sill height glazing, handrail for toddlers, easy to clean flooring and more space per row of pews for convenience. Also consider providing extra space in front of pews for children to manoeuvre. Consider a parent in a wheelchair.

Audio & Visual Technology

Whilst audio visual considerations are an important part of the Mass, it should enhance the celebration of the Mass and not be visually distracting from the altar or architecture. Avoid placing speakers and monitors in the sanctuary.

Mixing boards, amplifiers and other sound reinforcing technology should be concealed, yet



readily available for the music director to adjust during the services. Design should allow for some flexibility/renewal and equipment changes over time, as well as provisions to conceal cabling to avoid trip hazards and clutter. Consider additional conduits with pull-strings for futureproofing.

The acoustic properties of the nave and sanctuary should be designed such that it has reduced echo and reverberation. Acoustic treatments should not be distracting or interfere with the noble architecture of the space. T-bar and acoustic tile ceilings are prohibited.

Lighting

Multi-staged and dimmable lighting for the sanctuary, altar, nave and side aisles is to be provided for all churches and chapels such that its quality enhances the Liturgy, quiet adoration, and artwork. Consider ordinary Operational/Maintenance (O&M) requirements for the eventual replacement of lamps or fixtures.

Accessibility and Safe Environment

Parishes should emphasize inclusion of people with differing disabilities such that they are welcomed with dignity and able to participate equally in all ministries of the Liturgy where possible. This includes people with physical mobility, hearing, neurological, developmental and visual disabilities.

Consideration should be given to providing handicapped parking stalls in excess of the minimum requirements stipulated in local parking bylaws (no change in total number).

To safeguard priests and lay people, principles of Safe Environment are to be implemented. Provide a minimum of 3sft of clear vision panels in all doors to offices, work rooms, meeting rooms, confessionals and sacristy. Locate glazing such that people in wheelchairs can also use it.

Religious and Liturgical Art

The creation of a noble worship space should be fundamental to the building and restoration of churches. Each church in the Archdiocese must include an image or statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Statues or images of St. Joseph and the patron saint of that parish should also be given priority. Duplication of images of saints is prohibited in the sanctuary.

Sacred images should add to the overall cohesiveness of the architecture and not distract from the central experience of the Liturgy. The location of sacred imagery within a church should always be the result of thoughtful deliberation and part of the formation process (anecdote: Abstraction leaves room for interpretation. Images and symbols should not be left for interpretation).

When considering the commissioning or acceptance of donations of religious art, it should be clear that it meets certain criteria for authenticity, quality, and appropriateness as determined by the Archbishop, working in consultation with the Liturgical Commission and its Sacred Art & Architecture Sub-Committee. It is strongly recommended that parishes and building



committees confer early with the Liturgical Commission to confirm direction, before promises are either made or implied.

Other Considerations

a. Washrooms

Male, female and universal washrooms should all have baby change tables.

b. Storage Spaces

Provide sufficient storage for seasonal decorations and liturgical items. Keep separate from chairs, books, janitorial and O&M spaces.

c. Sustainability and Energy Efficiency

The designed lifespan of the building to be a minimum of 60 years with emphasis on providing good indoor air quality and low energy consumption.

d. Sprinklers

Sprinkler piping is visually disruptive; it is strongly encouraged to conceal it in the nave and sanctuary.

e. HVAC

Mechanical systems are to be discrete (separate from other spaces) and not kick on with a “whoosh.”