



ARCHDIOCESE OF PHILADELPHIA

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LOCATION OF CHOIR AND MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

COMMENTARY

OFFICE FOR WORSHIP

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Sacrosanctum Concilium, the document of the Second Vatican Council on the Sacred Liturgy, speaks clearly of the importance of music in the liturgy and, while urging that “choirs ... be diligently promoted,” insists that “religious singing by the people ... be skillfully fostered.” Implicit is the recognition of the special service and gift given to the people of God by skilled ministers of music who are, at the same time, members of the community at prayer. Subsequent Church documents and statements by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops support, develop, and expand upon *Sacrosanctum Concilium* regarding music ministers. In particular, they speak of the proper location of the choir, cantor, and other musicians in the church building itself -- as both musicians and members of the assembly.

The Office for Worship of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, based upon the norms expressed in liturgical documents regarding the placement of musicians, offers the following guidelines to pastors, musicians, and worship committees.

Musicians (choir, cantor, instrumentalists), recognized and appreciated for the special gift they bring to the celebration of the Sacred Liturgy, must be located in the church in such a way that they are also clearly perceived to be members of the worshipping assembly. While lending their special training and skill, they must also be servants of the Sacred Liturgy and members of the community at prayer. Their prayerful participation, reverent attention to the ritual, and avoidance of any distracting presence are essential. Indeed, these participative qualities provide a valuable witness of faith to the people of God.

As members of the assembly, the musicians must be provided a place which allows them to be truly able to participate in prayer and worship. Of importance at the *Liturgy of the Eucharist* would certainly be the opportunity to participate easily and reverently in the sacramental reception of the sacred species. As musicians, they must be provided a place that is conducive to music-making; that is, both a location and configuration that allow them to see and hear each other.

In considering the exact location in the church for musicians/instruments, there is no one answer that suits the circumstances or design of every church building. Rather, each space must be studied carefully while deciding how to best achieve both musical effectiveness and liturgical

propriety. Clearly, such a decision cannot simply be an individual's preference, but the result of a collaborative effort by pastors, musicians, liturgists, architects, acousticians and construction experts. In the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, the primary place to begin such a project is with the expertise of the Archdiocesan Office for Liturgical Music.

Church Design:

Older churches, typically built in rectangular form with high vaulted ceilings, often have very good natural acoustic quality and generally have the organ located in the choir loft. Distance from there to the sanctuary can present acoustical difficulties of "delay," yet the choir is most often at its acoustic best in the loft nearer to the organ, especially if the organist is also the choir director. In this situation, having the psalmist and cantor/song-leader located in the sanctuary is very important ... indeed, necessary.

Newer churches typically lack the height of older buildings with lofts and also are often designed in round or semi-circular fashion. This presents the unique challenge of determining precisely where the musicians are best accommodated ... as both worshippers and ministers. A location which positions the musicians *within* the assembly at a non-intrusive but somewhat forward space, and which, at the same time, allows their view of and attention to the altar/sanctuary is to be desired.

Factors to be Considered:

- **Recognition of the organ as the single most effective instrument for supporting the assembly's voice in a large space.** Such recognition, in addition, extends to the further recognition of the pipe organ as the most fitting instrument for sacred music and song in the church. Despite the considerable advancement of digital technology in building and designing today's electronic instruments, the quality and excellence of sound, and unmatched varieties of tonal resources in the pipe organ are closely imitated but never exactly replicated by electronic instruments. A true appreciation of this reality is of importance in the context of planning the location of musicians and the organ within the church/assembly. In older churches continued use and care of the pipe organ is essential. In planning new churches, the intent of eventually purchasing a pipe organ (as opposed to an initial purchase) should most definitely be included in building plans so that a later purchase and installation is better facilitated.
 - * The strategic placement of organ so that they speak "down" the main access of the church's nave must be recognized as important to the support of sung celebration of the Sacred Liturgy on the part of the priest celebrant, choir, and assembly.
 - * While acknowledging the prime importance of the organ, recognition of the circumstances which might require additional space for other keyboards and contemporary instruments comprising an ensemble is also necessary.
- **Decisions regarding the location of musicians/instruments will differ depending on whether the situation is that of designing a new church or, perhaps more challenging, that of renovating an older church space.** Recognition of what can/cannot be changed within an older church building (e.g., the difficulty/impossibility of relocation of a pipe organ from the loft to another location) is usually obvious. Of prime importance in either new design or redesign, however, is often something less obvious. This may be described as the "distance factor."

* **In older church buildings, the organ and choir in the loft as the primary music ‘force’ was generally the universal norm.** Choirs so located usually positioned themselves naturally in slightly semi-circular position near or around the organ. In these churches today, the choir is most likely still at its acoustic and musical best in the loft with the organist, especially if the latter is not only the leader of the assembly, but is also the conductor of the choir. All are located in close proximity.

* In the time since the Second Vatican Council, musical practice and developments have led to the appearance of smaller ensembles as regular participants in music ministry along with organist/choir. In some cases the ensemble itself has actually become the principal (or only) music component for the assembly. The psalmist and cantor, in their roles, are directed by liturgical documents to lead singing at the **ambo or elsewhere in the sanctuary.**

* To be musically effective, the aforementioned groups (with the psalmist/cantor) should be located in close proximity to one another in such a way that they are both able to see and hear each other, and to function as a defined ensemble. Within a desired semi-circular configuration, the ensemble’s leader must be able to communicate clearly and effectively musical nuances and cues (e.g., shortening/ending/extending music, etc.) with both the group and the psalmist/cantor. This need for unity and communication requires well planned and adequate space for the ensemble toward the front/side of the assembly.

* In a church where the organ/choir is still in the loft as the principal music force, the experienced organist is able to communicate musical signals clearly with the psalmist/cantor at the ambo. The organist is also able to minimize or eliminate through musical techniques any acoustical or tempo delay which might occur due to distance from the front to the back of the church. However, such communication and unified effort of an ensemble in the loft with the psalmist/cantor in the sanctuary would be difficult and the musical consequence clearly weakened.

- Newer churches have sometimes suffered acoustically from faulty structural design. In addition, the over-use of sound-absorbing carpeting and other such sources may also have adversely affected acoustic quality. The consequence is often the use of sound systems which, if not properly calibrated, cause over-amplification of the music and a resulting displeasure within the assembly itself.
- The importance of the music area in relationship to the overall visual aspects of the worship space needs to be kept in mind. The space within the assembly assigned to and used by musicians must contribute to (rather than distract from) the beauty of the sacred worship space. Carefully considered features which promote maintenance of good order and placement of instruments, furniture and equipment, are important factors in preventing the appearance of clutter and disorder.

Finally, it must be said again that each church design presents its unique challenges in providing for appropriate spatial accommodation of musicians. However, given the importance which the liturgical documents attribute to music as central to liturgical celebration, as well as the acknowledgment made of the special contributions of music ministers in enhancing the assembly's experience and participation, it is clear that efforts to provide for musicians both their place as members of the praying assembly and their space for successful ministry in the church building, ultimately is of benefit to all the people of God gathered for worship.

Document Resources:

Inter Oecumenici: First Instruction on the Orderly Carrying Out of the Constitution on the Liturgy; Consilium for Implementing the Constitution on the Liturgy. 1964.

97. "The choir and organ shall occupy a place clearly showing that the singers and the organist form a part of the united community of the faithful and allowing them best to fulfill their part in the liturgy."

Musicam Sacram: Instruction on Music in the Liturgy; Sacred Congregation of Rites March 5, 1967

23. Taking into account the layout of each church, the choir should be placed in such a way: (a) That its nature should be clearly apparent; namely, that it is a part of the whole congregation, and that it fulfills a special role; (b) That it is easier for it to fulfill its liturgical function; (c) That each of its members may be able to participate easily in the Mass, that is to say by sacramental participation.

Music in Catholic Worship: BCL/NCCB, 1972 (1982)

38. The proper placing of the organ and choir according to the arrangement and acoustics of the church will facilitate celebration. Practically speaking, the choir must be near the director and the organ (both console and sound). The choir ought to be able to perform without too much distraction; the acoustics ought to give a lively presence of sound in the choir area and allow both tone and word to reach the congregation with clarity. Visually it is desirable that the choir appear to be part of the worshiping community, yet a part which serves in a unique way. Locating the organ console too far from the congregation causes a time lag which tends to make the singing drag unless the organist is trained to cope with it. A location near the front pews will facilitate congregational singing.

Built of Living Stones: Art, Architecture, and Worship - Guidelines of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, D.C., November, 2000.

37. By its design and its furnishings, the church reflects this diversity of roles. The one who presides, those who proclaim God's word, the ministers of music All play an integral part in the public prayer of the Church. The design of the church should reflect the unity of the entire assembly and at the same time ensure that each person is able to exercise his or her ministry in a space the fully accommodates the ritual action called for ... Careful attention to the placement of the individuals and groups ... can manifest or enhance their relationship with one another and with the entire body.

89. ... the skills and talents of [these] pastoral musicians, choirs and instrumentalists are especially valued by the Church. Because the roles of the choirs and cantors are exercised within the liturgical community, the space chosen for the musicians should clearly express that they are part of the assembly of worshipers. In addition, cantors and song leaders need visual contact with the music director while they themselves are visible to the rest of the congregation.
90. The directives concerning music found in the GIRM and the guidance offered by MCW and LMT can assist the parish in planning appropriate space for musicians. The placement and prayerful decorum of the choir members can help the rest of the community to focus on the liturgical action taking place at the ambo, the altar, and the chair. The ministers of music are most appropriately located in a place where they can be part of the assembly and have the ability to be heard. Occasions or physical situations may necessitate that the choir be placed in or near the sanctuary. In such circumstances, the placement of the choir should never crowd or overshadow the other ministers in the sanctuary nor should it distract from the liturgical action.

General Instruction of the Roman Missal (Including Adaptations for the Dioceses of the United States of America.) Copyright © 2003, United States Catholic Conference, Inc., Washington, D.C. All rights reserved.

312. The choir should be positioned with respect to the design of each church so as to make clearly evident its character as a part of the gathered community of the faithful fulfilling a specific function. The location should also assist the choir to exercise its function more easily and conveniently allow each member full, sacramental participation in the Mass.
313. The organ and other lawfully approved musical instruments are to be placed in an appropriate place so that they can sustain the singing of both the choir and the congregation and be heard with ease by all if they are played alone.

A Commentary on the General Instruction of the Roman Missal : Developed under the Auspices of the Catholic Academy of Liturgy and Co-sponsored by the Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commission 2003. Edited by Edward Foley, Nathan D. Mitchell and Joanne Pierce.

312. The choir, organist, instrumentalists, and other ministers of music need to be understood to be part of the gathered community. The choir's location should assist in allowing its members to participate fully in the liturgical celebration. Their placement should link the role of the choir to the rest of the assembly, rather than appearing as a performance group separated from the faithful. The role of the choir and other musicians is analogous to that of liturgical music itself, i.e., to support and enhance the singing of the whole community and add beauty and solemnity to the liturgy.
313. The continual use of choir lofts or galleries, especially when an historic or functioning pipe organ is located there, may make the linkage between the choir and the assembly difficult. Additionally, the culture of disability reminds us of the problems of lofts and galleries that are not barrier-free. Persons with disabilities should be able to participate in music ministries wherever they are located in the church.
313. IGMRs do not treat tonal space. The acoustical character of the church is vital for supporting the participation of the community. The resonance of the church building should be considered

when deciding the best location for choirs and musicians, as well as the placement of a major instrument, e.g., a pipe organ. The acoustical requirements for singing and playing instruments must be determined before building or renovating churches. The shape and materials of the building determine how well sound travels naturally in the space.

From SING TO THE LORD, 2007, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops:

C. Location of Musicians and Their Instruments

95. Musicians and musical instruments should be located so as to enable proper interaction with the liturgical action, with the rest of the assembly, and among the various musicians. Ideally, ministers of music are located so as to enable their own full participation by being able to see and hear the Liturgy. In most cases, it will work best if musicians are in close proximity with each other—for example, by placing the organ console or keyboard close to the choir and to the cantor’s stand.
96. When not engaged in the direct exercise of their particular role, music ministers, like all ministers of the Liturgy, remain attentive members of the gathered assembly and should never constitute a distraction.
97. The cantor should generally be located in front of the congregation to lead the singing. When a congregation is able to sing on its own, either in response to the priest or ministers or through instrumental leadership, the cantor does not need to be visible. The Responsorial Psalm is usually proclaimed from the ambo or another location that is visible to the assembly. The psalmist, therefore, should sit in a place where the ambo is easily accessible.
98. The placement of the choir should show the choir members’ presence as a part of the worshiping community, yet serving in a unique way. Acoustical considerations will also play a role in determining the best location for the choir.
99. Placement of the organ console and pipes, speakers of amplified instruments, and acoustic instruments such as the piano is determined both by visual considerations, so that there is no distraction from the liturgical action, and by acoustical considerations, so that the sound can support the congregation and so that the instrumentalist is readily able to accompany cantors, psalmists, and choirs.
100. If the space occupied by the choir and instruments is visible to the assembly, it must reflect the sacredness of the music ministry. Any appearance of clutter or disorganization must be avoided. Just as no one would tolerate stacks of books and papers in the sanctuary, the music ministry space should be free from clutter.

D. Acoustics

101. Acoustics refers to the quality of a space for sustaining sound, especially its generation, transmission, and reception. While individual ministers of the Liturgy, ensembles, and even choirs can be sound-enhanced through amplification methods, the only amplification of the singing assembly comes from the room itself. Given the primacy of the assembly’s song among all musical elements of the Liturgy, the acoustical properties of the worship space are critical. For this reason, specialists in acoustics should be consulted when building or modifying liturgical space.
102. If each member of the assembly senses his or her voice joined to the entire community in a swell of collective sound, the acoustics are well suited to the purpose of a gathered community engaged in sung prayer. If, on the other hand, each person hears primarily only his or her own voice, the acoustics of the space are fundamentally deficient.

103. Sound-absorbing building materials include carpet, porous ceiling tiles, soft wood, untreated soft stone, cast concrete or cinder block, and padded seating. Avoiding excessive use of such materials makes it easier to achieve the ideal of many voices united in song.⁸⁴
104. The acoustics of a church or chapel should be resonant so that there is no need for excessive amplification of musical sound in order to fill the space and support the assembly's song. When the acoustics of the building naturally support sound, acoustic instruments and choirs generally need no amplification. An acoustically dead space precipitates a high cost of sound reinforcement, even for the organ.

⁸⁴ See USCCB, *Built of Living Stones: Art, Architecture and Worship* (BLS) (Washington, DC: USCCB,2000), no. 200.

From the General instruction of the Roman Missal, third edition, 2011.

312. The schola cantorum (choir) should be so positioned with respect to the arrangement of each church that its nature may be clearly evident, namely, as part of the assembled community of the faithful undertaking a specific function. The positioning should also help the choir to exercise this function more easily and allow each choir member full sacramental participation in the Mass in a convenient manor.

313. The organ and other lawfully approved musical instruments should be placed in a suitable place so that they can sustain the singing of both the choir and the people and be heard with ease by everybody if they are played alone. It is appropriate that before being put into liturgical use, the organ be blessed according to the rite described in the Roman Ritual.

In Advent the use of the organ and other musical instruments should be marked by a moderation suited to the character of this time of year, without expressing in anticipation the full joy of the Nativity of the Lord

In Lent the playing of the organ and other musical instruments is allowed only in order to support the singing. Exception, however, are Laetare Sunday, solemnities and Feasts.