

The Diocese of La Crosse

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NORMS FOR THE CONSTRUCTION AND ORDERING OF CHURCH BUILDINGS
IN THE DIOCESE OF LA CROSSE

Diocese of La Crosse
2006

DECREE

**Promulgating Norms for the
Construction and Ordering of Church Buildings
in the Diocese of La Crosse**

As an integral part of liturgical renewal, the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council undertook to promote the noble beauty of liturgical art and architecture. In keeping with the tradition of the Church, the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* reemphasizes that church buildings, as with all sacred art and furnishings, “should worthily and beautifully serve the dignity of worship” (n. 122). While giving free scope in matters of style, all of the art employed in the church building is to adorn it with “due reverence and honor” (n. 123).

In the documents that seek to apply these and other liturgical principles more concretely, the church building is similarly shown to be of great importance. Sacred buildings are to be “examples of genuine Christian art” (*Inter Oecumenici*, n. 13), “suited to sacred celebrations, dignified, evincing a noble beauty, not mere costly display, and . . . should stand as a sign and symbol of heavenly realities” (*Rite for the Dedication of a Church*, n. 3; also *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 122).

Pope John Paul II, himself a bishop-participant in the Council, has called us to an “examination of conscience” regarding the reception of the Council’s liturgical principles (see *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, n. 36; *Spiritus et Sponsa*, n. 6). For my part as bishop, the Pope’s call is one of utmost seriousness, for the diocesan bishop is bound to regulate liturgical matters in his diocese (see *Inter Oecumenici*, n. 22), which includes sacred art and architecture. The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* calls on ordinaries to encourage and favor “truly sacred art” that is characterized by a “noble beauty” (n. 124) capable of “turning men’s minds devoutly toward God” (n. 122). Similarly, bishops are to “ensure that works of art which are repugnant to faith, morals, and Christian piety, and which offend true religious sense either by depraved forms or through lack of artistic merit or because of mediocrity or pretense, be removed from the house of God and from other

sacred places” (*ibid.*, n. 124). The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal (Third Typical Edition)* reminds bishops of this duty when it says that the “Diocesan bishop, moreover, should use the counsel and help of [the diocesan commission on the sacred liturgy and sacred art] whenever it comes to laying down norms on this matter, approving plans for new buildings, and making decisions on the more important issues” (n. 291). The diocesan bishop is also called upon to determine the location of the tabernacle in the church building, “either in the sanctuary, apart from the altar of celebration,” or “even in some chapel suitable for the faithful’s private adoration and prayer and which is organically connected to the church and readily visible to the Christian faithful” (n. 315).

For this reason, I take this opportunity to recall many of the laws, both universal and national, that govern the building and renovating of churches as well as, at the same time and at the required places, provide particular law for the Diocese of La Crosse. Legislation particular to the Diocese of La Crosse ought to be read in conjunction with the Church’s universal discipline as found in the ritual books, *Code of Canon Law*, and other liturgical instructions. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops document *Built of Living Stones* should also be consulted when undertaking a building or renovating project. I am grateful to Christopher Carstens, Director of the Office of Sacred Worship, for his direction in compiling these norms and drafting the text.

These *Norms for the Construction and Ordering of Church Buildings in the Diocese of La Crosse*, moreover, should not be seen as a restriction on local parishes or institutions taking on a church building or renovating project: rather, they are meant to promote our love of Christ. A well-ordered and carefully-built church is an offering of love to God. At the same time, truly sacred buildings show to the modern world the love of Christ, he who is love incarnate.

With this decree, I hereby publish the *Norms for the Construction and Ordering of Church Buildings in the Diocese of La Crosse* as particular law for the Diocese of La Crosse, effective November 9, 2006, the Feast of the Dedication of the Lateran Basilica. Henceforth, these norms are applicable to all churches and chapels within the Diocese undertaking the building of a new structure or the reordering of an existing one.

Saint Joseph the Workman, Principal Patron of our Diocese and model of labor and of service to Jesus, is a most fitting guide to those involved with the building or renovating of a church. May his example direct each of us to work with diligence and love for Christ our Lord and the world he came to redeem.

Given at La Crosse on the fourth day of October in the year of Our Lord 2006, the Memorial of Saint Francis of Assisi, Secondary Patron of our Diocese.

(Most Rev.) Jerome E. ListECKI
Bishop of La Crosse

Benedict T. Nguyen
Chancellor

NORMS

Norms for the Construction and Ordering of Church Buildings in the Diocese of La Crosse

Concerning the Edifice

The external appearance of the church building must seek to convey that it is “the dwelling of God with men reconciled and united in Christ” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1180).

Concerning the Threshold

The visibility and beauty of the church’s entrance must reveal the importance of entering into communion with Christ and his members.

Concerning the Baptismal Font

The baptismal font should allow for both immersion and pouring (see *RCIA*, n. 213; *National Statutes for the Catechumenate*, n. 17). It should be located to express its relationship to the other sacraments, especially the Eucharist (see *Built of Living Stones*, nn. 66, 69) and should be visible to all who enter the church (*ibid.*, n. 67).

Concerning the Nave

The body of the church – the nave, or the place where the assembly is gathered – must reflect that the assembly is a part of the People of God called to participate actively in the Paschal mystery of Christ made present in the celebration of the liturgy. This area must not resemble “the audience’s space in a theater or public arena because in the liturgical assembly, there is no audience” (*Built of Living Stones*, n. 51). Seating is not to be antiphonal (i.e., where the two main sections of seating face one another across an aisle), nor should there be seating extending behind the sanctuary.

Concerning the Sanctuary

“The sanctuary is the place where the altar stands, where the word of God is proclaimed, and where the priest, the deacon, and the other ministers exercise their offices” (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, n. 295). To demonstrate the importance of the actions that take place in the sanctuary, actions that are at the heart of the Church’s life, it “should suitably be marked off from the body of the church either by its being somewhat elevated or by a particular structure and ornamentation. It should, however, be large enough to allow the Eucharist to be celebrated properly and easily seen” (*ibid.*).

Concerning the Altar

The main altar must stand at the center of the sanctuary, and it should be freestanding and fixed to the floor (or be of such weight that it cannot be moved but with great effort) rather than movable. Because it is a sign not just of the Lord’s Supper and Heavenly Banquet, but first and foremost of the altar of sacrifice, the altar must appear as

something more than a mere table. A symbol of Christ himself, the “capstone” of the Church, it is recommended that the entire altar be made of natural stone rather than simply wood; if it is not possible for the entire altar to be of stone, at least the mensa should be made of natural stone. It must also be of sufficient size to accommodate multiple chalices for distribution of the Precious Blood to the faithful.

Concerning the Ambo

The place from which the word of God is proclaimed must be “somewhat elevated, fixed, and of a suitable design and nobility. It should reflect the dignity of God’s word and be a clear reminder to the people that in the Mass the table of God’s word . . . is placed before them” (*Lectionary for Mass*, “Introduction,” n. 32). Because the table of the word is so closely related to the table of Christ’s body, the design of the ambo ought to be in close relationship to that of the altar (*ibid.*); the ambo and altar must not, however, be opposite one another along an axis of the building, for the altar is to remain central.

Concerning the Presider’s Chair

Signifying the priest’s function in the person of Christ, the head of his Body, the Church, the presider’s chair is to be distinct from those places occupied by the faithful and other liturgical ministers. Reserved for the presiding priest or deacon, the presider’s chair ought to reflect the relationship between the ministerial priesthood, the word of God, and the Paschal sacrifice of Christ by its artistic and architectural connection to the ambo and altar.

Concerning the Tabernacle

The tabernacle is to be located in the sanctuary of the church, preferably along the center axis of the church in the apse of the sanctuary; only with the permission of the Diocesan Bishop may the tabernacle be placed outside of the sanctuary.

Concerning the Confessional

In order to be a constant reminder of God’s offer of forgiveness, the confessional, whether free-standing or in its own room, must be conspicuous to those in the church. It must allow, if possible, the option to celebrate the sacrament anonymously (with a grille or screen) or face-to-face.

Concerning the Choir

The choir and musicians have at times parts uniquely their own to carry out, while at other times they serve to lead the assembly in song: the choir’s placement must allow for both functions. The choir must not, however, be placed in the sanctuary itself.

Concerning Sacred Images

Church buildings must not neglect the necessary placement of sacred images, either in the form of paintings, mosaics, statues, or icons. Their placement is not only required in devotional areas in the church, but the entire building must incorporate them to manifest that the church building itself is the tangible expression of the invisible Mystical Body of Christ.

COMMENTARY

On the Norms for the Construction and Ordering of Church Buildings in the Diocese of La Crosse

Introduction

The Church Building Is an Image of the Church and of Christ

1. While it is fundamentally true that the church building receives its dignity and worth – and hence merits reverence and honor – because it is a house of God, it is likewise true that its dignity comes from the fact that it is the place in which his chosen people assemble to celebrate the mysteries of faith. Because the gathered members of God’s Church form the Body of his Son, Jesus Christ, the building that houses this Body must manifest a similar magnificence to the Son of God. The church building must be a sacramental sign of the Church – the Body of Christ – gathered in that place and existing eternally in heaven. Hence, at the beginning of the construction of a church, the *Rite of Laying the Foundation Stone* explains that “the structure built of stone will be a visible sign of the living Church, God’s building, which is formed of the people themselves” (n. 1). Similarly, at the church’s dedication, the rite recalls that “because the church is a visible building, it stands as a special sign of the pilgrim Church on earth and reflects the Church dwelling in heaven” (*Rite for the Dedication of a Church*, n. 2).

2. The body of Jesus, born of the Virgin Mary, is the true and perfect temple of the New Covenant (see *Rite for the Dedication of a Church*, n. 1). His people, incorporated into his Body through the sacrament of Baptism, are the living stones of this temple of God (*ibid.*). The visible church building, furthermore, is a sign of this temple: of the living stones that make up the Body of Christ and, ultimately, of Jesus Christ himself.

Norms followed by Catechesis on the Various Aspects of the Church Building

Concerning the Edifice

3. *The external appearance of the church building must seek to convey that it is “the dwelling of God with men reconciled and united in Christ”* (Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 1180).

4. The external appearance of the church building is extremely important. The church building, no less than any other element of our earthly liturgy, is sacramental: that is, through created things, the invisible power and presence of God is made present. In the case of the sacred building, that which is encountered – the edifice, the brick or stone, the windows, the steeple, the ringing bells – signifies and, in some way, makes present the Church itself, the Mystical Body of Christ. The liturgical calendar of the Church recognizes this same truth: when a feast of the Lord falls on a Sunday in Ordinary Time, it takes precedence over the Sunday celebration, while other feasts do not (*General Norms for the Liturgical Year and Calendar*, n. 5). Consequently, when the Feast of the Dedication of the Lateran Basilica of St. John falls on a Sunday, its celebration has priority over that particular Sunday, for it is a feast of the Lord. While this may at first seem strange, it expresses the Church's theology about churches: that they are sacramental signs – and hence, in some way, the reality – of Christ.

5. Church buildings, by the celebration of the rite of dedication which consecrates and calls down the dwelling of the Holy Spirit, become *Christian*, that is, sacred. They, like people, receive an initiation: at the beginning of the rite, their walls are “baptized,” sprinkled with water; these same walls are then “confirmed,” anointed with Sacred Chrism; finally, the first Eucharist is celebrated at the altar, where for the first time it “receives the body of Christ” (see *Rite for the Dedication of a Church*, n. 17). Henceforth, churches, like the Christians within them, are set apart, sacred signs and symbols of Christ himself.

6. Like Christians, the church building carries on the duties of Christ: those of prophet, priest, and king. As *prophet*, this “sermon in stones” proclaims the incarnate Christ who came to reconcile the world to the Father. When passing by a church, the sacramental building itself calls God to our minds (see *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 122), as well as our duty to turn back to him (Many, in fact, sign themselves with the Cross as they pass a church.). As an image of Christ the *priest*, the church is a sign of the sacrifice Christ offered to the Father, for the center of the church (and the center of the Church) is the altar of the Paschal sacrifice. As the Prayer of Dedication asks God, “Here may your children, gathered around your altar, celebrate the memorial of the Paschal Lamb” (n. 62). It is also a symbol of the sacrifices made by those who contributed to the construction of the building. Finally, like Christ the King, the church's *kingly* dimension signifies the Church's service to the modern world. The Prayer of Dedication for the church continues: “Here may the poor find justice, the victims of oppression, freedom” (*ibid.*). As many pastors can attest, the rectory doorbell rings often: for when one is in need – of food, clothing, spiritual or physical assistance, or other necessities – the church building serves as a beacon of hope and goodwill to the hungry, thirsty, naked, and needy (see *Matthew 25:31-46*). The church building, then, is a sign of Christ, the very love of God made incarnate among us.

Concerning the Threshold

7. *The visibility and beauty of the church's entrance must reveal the importance of entering into communion with Christ and his members.*

8. “To enter into the house of God, we must cross a *threshold*, which symbolizes passing from the world wounded by sin to the world of new Life to which all men are called. The visible church is a symbol of the Father’s house toward which the people of God are journeying and where the Father ‘will wipe every tear from their eyes’” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1186). The return to the heavenly homeland to which we are called follows, as Christ tells us, the narrow way, through the narrow gate (see *Matthew* 7:13-14); it is a path that humanity could not follow before Christ opened it by his Paschal mystery, and today it is a path we cannot follow without his grace.

9. If we are to return to God, we are only able to do so in his Son, Jesus Christ, and his Body, which is the Church. The Fathers of the Church recognized this truth in the Old Testament signs. The Ark of Noah, for example, was taken by many to be a sign of the Church: while the deluge destroyed the world of sin outside of it, the Ark carried those within to safety where a new beginning was made in a world cleansed of evil. The instruction that God gave to Moses and Aaron concerning the first Passover (see *Exodus* 12), that the meal was to be eaten in the house and that no one was to go outdoors until morning, pointed to the truth that partaking of the true Paschal Lamb, Jesus Christ, could only take place within the house of the Church, and that outside of it was death and destruction. If salvation comes from within the Church, which is Christ’s Body, then the entrance to that safe-haven must show this truth to those who seek it.

10. Christ often spoke of himself as a gate or door (see *John* 10:1-10). At the blessing of a new entrance for a church, we recall that Christ the Good Shepherd “is the door through which those who follow him enter and are safe, go in and go out, and find pasture” (*Book of Blessings*, n. 1229).

11. When preparing to build or renovate a church, therefore, great care is to be taken in constructing an entrance that speaks of welcome into Christ and our communion with him, whom we follow along that narrow road on our pilgrimage back to the Father’s house.

Concerning the Baptismal Font

12. *The baptismal font should allow for both immersion and pouring (see RCIA, n. 213; National Statutes for the Catechumenate, n. 17). It should be located to express its relationship to the other sacraments, especially the Eucharist (see Built of Living Stones, nn. 66, 69) and should be visible to all who enter the church (ibid., n. 67).*

13. Closely associated with the entrance of the church’s threshold is the baptismal font, for just as the physical entrance has both practical and sacramental meaning, so too does the font symbolize entrance into the Church. Like the deluge and Passover figures considered above, Baptism symbolizes – and causes – death to the “old Adam,” cleansing from sin’s defilement, and rebirth to new life in Christ, all of which take place when the person enters the Church through Baptism. The font, consequently, is a kind of a tomb

(death to the old self), a bath (cleansing from sin), and a womb (rebirth to new life). To recall these great mysteries, it is not unreasonable to place the font near the main entrance of the church building, perhaps even serving as the font for the holy water with which the faithful bless themselves upon entering the building, thereby recalling their own Baptism.

14. In addition to marking the entry into the Church, the baptismal font is also intimately related to the altar and the Eucharist, the re-presentation of the Paschal mystery and center of the Church's life. While the sacrament of the Eucharist is the perfection of the life of grace, the sacrament of Baptism, as St. Thomas Aquinas says, is the entry into the life of grace: the one, Baptism, leads to the other, the Eucharist (*Summa Theologica*, III.73.3). For this reason, the font should have some architectural and artistic connection to the altar of Eucharistic sacrifice (such as their location vis-à-vis one another, similarity in materials, design, etc.).

15. Finally, there is more than one acceptable way of administering the sacrament of Baptism. While pouring water over the head (also called infusion) is more common today and follows upon the Church's recent practice, immersion is also an option. Baptism by immersion consists of the recipient's entire body descending beneath the level of water three times while the Trinitarian formula is recited by the celebrant; immersion may also be of the head only (*RCIA*, n. 226A; *National Statutes for the Catechumenate*, n. 17). A font that is designed for both Baptism by pouring and Baptism by immersion can allow for the administration of the sacrament with greater symbolism – death, cleansing, and rebirth – while at the same time maintaining a dignified celebration.

Concerning the Nave

16. *The body of the church – the nave, or the place where the assembly is gathered – must reflect that the assembly is a part of the People of God called to participate actively in the Paschal mystery of Christ made present in the celebration of the liturgy. This area must not resemble “the audience’s space in a theater or public arena because in the liturgical assembly, there is no audience” (Built of Living Stones, n. 51). Seating is not to be antiphonal (i.e., where the two main sections of seating face one another across an aisle), nor should there be seating extending behind the sanctuary.*

17. The People of God in its entirety – clergy and laity, as well as the angels and saints – constitutes an organically structured priestly community (see *Lumen Gentium*, n. 11) and forms, “as it were, one mystical person” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1119). This one mystical person is none other than Christ himself: he the head, we the members. As members of his Body, each of us, in our lives and in the celebration of the liturgy, has particular functions to perform: “As a body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also Christ” (*I Corinthians* 12:12 and following). Hence the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* says that the People of God “has a coherent and hierarchical structure,” and that “the general ordering of the sacred building must be such that in some way it conveys the image of the gathered assembly and allows the appropriate ordering of all the participants” (n. 294). In other

words, the entire Body of Christ is hierarchical: all, whether ordained or lay, share in the one priesthood of Christ, the exercise of which takes on differing activities. Hence, the church building must show that lay and ordained are related to one another in a community. At the same time, the common priesthood of the baptized and the ministerial priesthood of the ordained are essentially different, not simply different in degree (see *Lumen Gentium*, n. 10). There must also, therefore, be a distinction between the roles and orders of the clergy and laity within the sacred building. The sanctuary and the nave ought to make this tenet of the faith clear to all.

18. For the assembly's part, its active participation in the celebration of the liturgy is the "aim to be considered above all else" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 14). Seating, therefore, "should be arranged with appropriate care for the faithful so that they are able to participate in the sacred celebrations visually and spiritually, in the proper manner" (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, n. 311). The people should also be able to "easily take up the postures required for the different parts of the celebration and . . . easily come forward to receive Holy Communion" (*ibid.*). Such participation should involve, and be founded upon, spiritual participation. To aid this internal participation as well as to express it, liturgical participation should also involve all of the senses and the entire body itself through its various postures. All such activity is directed to the fullest form of participation, which is sacramental, sharing in Christ's work by the reception of Holy Communion. The arrangement of the assembly's place must promote this type of participation. The faithful should be able to see and hear the actions taking place at the altar, ambo, font, and other places. They should also have sufficient room and amenities to stand, kneel, sit, and process. In short, the people's place should make clear that they have the right and duty to participate in Christ's saving work carried out in the liturgy. The liturgy is work (*ergia*), not some passive form of information or entertainment. Seating that promotes a form of mere presence is unacceptable and unjustly fosters a spiritual lethargy contrary to the true spirit of the liturgy.

Concerning the Sanctuary

19. "*The sanctuary is the place where the altar stands, where the word of God is proclaimed, and where the priest, the deacon, and the other ministers exercise their offices*" (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, n. 295). *To demonstrate the importance of the actions that take place in the sanctuary, actions that are at the heart of the Church's life, it "should suitably be marked off from the body of the church either by its being somewhat elevated or by a particular structure and ornamentation. It should, however, be large enough to allow the Eucharist to be celebrated properly and easily seen"* (*ibid.*).

20. Together with the nave, the sanctuary forms part of the image of the "Church living in this place" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1180), that "one mystical person," – Christ and his Body, the Church – who carries on throughout the ages the one saving work of the Paschal mystery. While both the common priesthood of the baptized and the ministerial priesthood of the ordained make up the earthly participants of the

People of God, the actions performed in the person of Christ the head (*in persona Christi capitis*) by the ordained in the sanctuary are theologically – and therefore architecturally – the source and summit of the Church’s life. The sanctuary, therefore, should be distinct from, yet connected to, the nave.

21. Practically speaking, it is important that the sanctuary be spacious enough to carry out all of the revised rites of the Church, especially the liturgies of Holy Week, funerals, and Eucharistic worship outside of Mass. More about the altar, ambo, and chair in the sanctuary will follow below.

22. The most perfect manifestation of the Church “consists in the full, active participation of all God’s holy people in the same liturgical celebration, especially in the same Eucharist, in one prayer, at one altar” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 41), especially when presided over by the diocesan bishop. When the People of God gather, in fact, the first sign of Christ’s presence is in the gathered faithful, which includes both lay and ordained (*ibid.*, n. 7). The gathered People of God, united in the body of the church, yet distinguished according to office and function, is a sign of Christ himself in the midst of the world. The design of the church interior – its nave and sanctuary – must seek to convey this reality.

Concerning the Altar

23. *The main altar must stand at the center of the sanctuary, and it should be freestanding and fixed to the floor (or be of such weight that it cannot be moved but with great effort) rather than movable. Because it is a sign not just of the Lord’s Supper and Heavenly Banquet, but first and foremost of the altar of sacrifice, the altar must appear as something more than a mere table. A symbol of Christ himself, the “capstone” of the Church, it is recommended that the entire altar be made of natural stone rather than simply wood; if it is not possible for the entire altar to be of stone, at least the mensa should be made of natural stone. It must also be of sufficient size to accommodate multiple chalices for distribution of the Precious Blood to the faithful.*

24. Of the church’s appointments, the altar has the highest dignity, for it is the visible symbol of many realities. First of all, it is a symbol of Jesus Christ himself. The Fathers of the Church “did not hesitate to assert that Christ was the victim, priest, and altar of his own sacrifice. For in the Letter to the Hebrews Christ is presented as the High Priest who is also the living altar of the heavenly temple; and in the Book of Revelation our Redeemer appears as the Lamb who has been sacrificed and whose offering is taken by the holy angel to the altar in heaven” (*Rite of Dedication of an Altar*, n. 1).

25. In addition to Christ himself, the altar represents those who have been remade in his image. St. Ignatius of Antioch and St. Polycarp – martyrs whose deaths are spoken of in Eucharistic terms – speak of the Christian heart as God’s altar. Later, St. Gregory the Great will ask, “What is God’s altar if not the souls of those who lead good lives . . . ?

Rightly, then, the heart of the just is said to be the altar of God” (*ibid.*, n. 2). In many ways, then, the altar is similar to the church building itself: since both are sacramental signs of Christ and Christians, it is necessary that they be beautiful and legible to all who encounter them: they are to be different from other buildings, different from other tables, just as Christians are different from other men and women.

26. If the relics of martyrs or other saints are to be deposited beneath the altar, these relics should be recognizable as parts of human bodies, effort should be made to see to their authenticity, and they are to be placed beneath the altar rather than set into the mensa or table (see *Rite for the Dedication of a Church*, n. 5).

Concerning the Ambo

27. *The place from which the word of God is proclaimed must be “somewhat elevated, fixed, and of a suitable design and nobility. It should reflect the dignity of God’s word and be a clear reminder to the people that in the Mass the table of God’s word . . . is placed before them” (Lectionary for Mass, “Introduction,” n. 32). Because the table of the word is essentially related to the table of Christ’s body; the design of the ambo ought to be in close relationship to that of the altar (ibid.); the ambo and altar must not, however, be opposite one another along an axis of the building, for the altar is to remain central.*

28. The ambo, from which the faithful are nourished at the Table of the Word (see *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, n. 18), is the place where God’s revelation is proclaimed, where Christ speaks to his people in the Gospel, and where God’s word is explained to his people in the homily, all of which prepare for that greatest sacrament of faith, the Eucharist (see *Lectionary for Mass*, “Introduction,” n. 10). As the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist are “so closely connected with each other that they form but one single act of worship” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 56), the ambo and the altar must share similar – though not equal – status in the church building. The ambo, while not equal in prominence to the altar, must express some artistic or architectural relationship to the altar. But since the Liturgy of the Word leads to the Liturgy of the Eucharist, the altar must be central; the altar and ambo ought not to be facing each other or in the same position on either side of the axis of the church building.

29. To express the dignity of the Liturgy of the Word, in which the Church venerates the divine Scriptures (see *Dei Verbum*, n. 21), the ambo is to be reserved solely for those elements composing the Liturgy of the Word: from the first reading through the General Intercessions (see *Lectionary for Mass*, “Introduction,” n. 33). Announcements, remarks before or after Mass, and the leading of songs not a part of the Liturgy of the Word from the ambo are not in keeping with its significance, just as using the altar for anything other than the Eucharistic celebration or devotions may be inappropriate.

Concerning the Presider's Chair

30. *Signifying the priest's function in the person of Christ, the head of his Body, the Church, the presider's chair is to be distinct from those places occupied by the faithful and other liturgical ministers. Reserved for the presiding priest or deacon, the presider's chair ought to reflect the relationship between the ministerial priesthood, the word of God, and the Paschal sacrifice of Christ by its artistic and architectural connection to the ambo and altar.*

31. While all of the baptized are incorporated into the Body of Christ and are empowered to work after the manner of Christ as priest, prophet, and king, the ordained minister, by the sacrament of Holy Orders, shares a different conformity to Jesus Christ and his one priesthood, such that he is enabled to act in the person of Christ the head (*in persona Christi capitis*) of his Body, the Church. This beautiful truth of the faith about the priesthood is expressed in many ways during the liturgy, one of which is the design, placement, and use of the presider's chair. Although one with the body of believers, the ordained minister is called from among them to represent them and the entire Church before God, as well as to represent Christ to his people. Such an exalted calling – for it is one given by God, not earned by man – is rightly shown by the presider's chair.

32. It is beneficial to the entire body of believers to maintain the proper emphasis on the priest's role and the symbols of his office, such as his chair. As a body – specifically, Christ's Body – the Church must have a head; those souls in heaven, in fact, are described as being “recapitulated in Christ” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1138; *Ephesians* 1:10), indicating their definitive and enduring place under the headship of Christ. A body without a head is dead and disfigured; so, too, is a head without a body. In the sacramental liturgy that the Church celebrates on her pilgrimage, the hidden reality of Christ's Body – head and members – must be expressed with outward and sensible symbols: the chair is an indispensable part of the entire image of Christ, his Body, which is the Church.

Concerning the Tabernacle

33. *The tabernacle is to be located in the sanctuary of the church, preferably along the center axis of the church in the apse of the sanctuary; only with the permission of the Diocesan Bishop may the tabernacle be placed outside of the sanctuary.*

34. The Church, of which the building is the sacramental sign, was born of Christ himself. As St. Augustine so beautifully expressed and the Second Vatican Council took up, “it was from the side of Christ as he slept the sleep of death upon the cross that there came forth ‘the wondrous sacrament of the whole Church’” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 5). The water and blood that flowed from the opened side of Christ symbolize the waters of Baptism, in which souls are reborn, and the Eucharist, with which the reborn are nourished. Consequently, both the font and the altar have conspicuous places in the church building. Since the Eucharist, which comes from the altar for the feeding of the

baptized, remains with the Church in the tabernacle, so too, must the tabernacle be located in a prominent location.

35. As the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* explains, Christ becomes present to us in the liturgy in a variety of ways: in the gathered assembly, the proclaimed Word, the power of the sacraments, the ministry of his priests, and especially in the Eucharistic species (*ibid.*, n. 7). And while it is true to call each of these presences of Christ “real,” the presence of Christ in the Eucharist is the “most excellent” of them all, for in this sacrament the presence of Christ is both substantial and, for this very reason, abiding (see *Mysterium Fidei*, n. 39). Because Christ is present and is able to be encountered in these various ways at the liturgy, the nave, the ambo, and the chair all have a dignity accorded to them. Christ’s most excellent presence under the Eucharistic species also has a commensurate symbol, the tabernacle.

36. The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* and its subsequent documents hold that the liturgy and its signs express and foster the interior faith and devotion of its participants (see *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, nn. 21, 26, 33, 50, 59, 72; *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, nn. 20, 34-36; *Musicam Sacram*, n. 16). To express what we, members of the Catholic Church, believe about the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the placement of the tabernacle must be in a central, dignified, and prominent place in the sanctuary. To foster this same faith within us, the centrally-placed tabernacle and the sacrament it contains will call to our minds and foster in our hearts our own Eucharistic center.

37. The Eucharist, both in its celebration and in its adoration, is to be the center of the Catholic’s life, the core of the parish’s life, and the “beating heart of the Church’s life” (Pope Benedict XVI’s *Missionary Prayer Intention* for June 2005). “The Church draws her life from the Eucharist. This truth does not simply express a daily experience of faith, but recapitulates *the heart of the mystery of the Church*” (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, n. 1). The reserved sacrament of the Eucharist – that is, Jesus Christ himself, substantially and entirely present to us – should likewise be seen as the “beating heart” of the church building.

Concerning the Confessional

38. *In order to be a constant reminder of God’s offer of forgiveness, the confessional, whether free-standing or in its own room, must be conspicuous to those in the church. It must allow, if possible, the option to celebrate the sacrament anonymously (with a grille or screen) or face-to-face.*

39. Some of the most intimate encounters between Christ our Savior and us sinners occur in the sacrament of Penance. As many priests can attest, to absolve the sinner in Christ’s name is one of the most beautiful and awe-inspiring functions of the priesthood. To express this awesome reality, the Second Vatican Council decreed that “the rite and formularies for the sacrament of Penance are to be revised so that they may more clearly express both the nature and effect of this sacrament” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n.

72). One element of the celebration of the sacrament of Penance (and of every other liturgical celebration) is the place of its celebration (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1179 and following). The normative place for celebrating the sacrament of Penance, the confessional (see *Code of Canon Law*, can. 964 §3), should also express the magnificent nature and effects of reconciliation.

40. “The Church is deeply concerned with calling the faithful to continual conversion and renewal” (*Decree promulgating the revised Rite of Penance*): to aid in the calling to conversion and renewal, the confessional must “speak.” If a confessional is not clearly visible to the faithful, then the *call* to conversion, the *call* to forgiveness, and the *call* to encounter Christ in this sacrament cannot be easily heard. As the People of God are meant to become “in the world a sign of conversion to God” (*Rite of Penance*, “Introduction,” n. 4), they themselves must first encounter and become converted to God, particularly in the sacrament of Penance.

Concerning the Choir

41. *The choir and musicians have at times parts uniquely their own to carry out, while at other times they serve to lead the assembly in song: the choir’s placement must allow for both functions. The choir must not, however, be placed in the sanctuary itself.*

42. Like others who perform a ministerial function, those in the choir are members of the assembly and a part of the entire worshipping body; at the same time, they perform a particular function within that assembly, one that is expressed architecturally by the choir’s placement. In the Diocese of La Crosse, there are two common locations for the choir and its musicians: in the choir loft or near the front of the church. Whichever place is used, the norms provided for the reformed liturgy are to be respected: choir members must be allowed to participate sacramentally in the Mass (see *Musicam Sacram*, n. 23); the choir should support the assembly’s singing when needed (*ibid.*); and it should not distract the assembly from the principal action taking place at the altar or ambo (see *Music in Catholic Worship*, n. 38). Acoustics should also be considered when determining the placement of the choir (*Music in Catholic Worship*, n. 38).

43. The instruments used by a choir are also subject to the above principles. It should be borne in mind that, while there are a variety of instruments that may be suitable for the liturgy, “the pipe organ is to be held in high esteem, for it is the traditional musical instrument which adds a wonderful splendor to the Church’s ceremonies and powerfully lifts up man’s mind to God and to higher things” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 120). Church building projects ought, therefore, to give significant consideration to the use of the Church’s traditional and current instrument.

Concerning Sacred Images

44. *Church buildings must not neglect the necessary placement of sacred images, either in the form of paintings, mosaics, statues, or icons. Their placement*

is not only required in devotional areas in the church, but the entire building must incorporate them to manifest that the church building itself is the tangible expression of the invisible Mystical Body of Christ.

45. When the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* asks the question “Who celebrates the liturgy?” it responds, after the *Book of Revelation*, that it is the Trinity, the heavenly powers, all creation, the servants of the Old and New Covenants, the new People of God, the Mother of God, and a countless multitude who celebrate. It is in this eternal liturgy – and with these eternal participants – the *Catechism* continues, that we participate whenever the sacramental liturgy is celebrated in our churches (see nn. 1136-1139).

46. So that this invisible reality is made apparent to the earthly participants in the church building, representative images must be made available. Their placement ought to reflect the reality of the Church, which the building symbolizes, namely, an organically structured priestly community (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 11; see also *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 125), and must not be a haphazard collection of pictures and statues. The proper placement of sacred images helps the church building to be a true image of Jesus himself, now present and active in the world with his Body, the Church.

Conclusion

The Church Building and Catholic Identity, Evangelization, and Stewardship

47. *What is the Church?* In its *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, the Second Vatican Council explains that the Church is a mystery, a part of the Father’s plan from the beginning. Yet, as the Father’s plan has unfolded through time, this Church has become known (see *Lumen Gentium*, n. 2). Instituted by Christ and revealed by the Holy Spirit, the Church is now the instrument by which Jesus Christ, the “light of the nations,” enlightens every creature (*ibid.*, n. 1). The early Church Fathers said much the same: “the Church is like the moon, all its light reflected from the sun” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 748; see also *Lumen Gentium*, n. 1, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 40). The Church is the New Eve, mother of all of the supernatural, taken from the side of the New Adam as he lay sleeping on the Cross. She is his sacrament, the “sign and the instrument of the communion of God and men” (*ibid.*, n. 780; see also *Lumen Gentium*, n. 1). She is both “visible and spiritual, a hierarchical society and the Mystical Body of Christ. She is one, yet formed of two components, human and divine” (*ibid.*, n. 779).

48. *What is a church building?* All that we believe about the Church – and, in turn, about Christ – is to be expressed in the church building itself: the church building is a visible profession of what we believe about the Church, which, in turn, is a visible statement of what we believe about Jesus Christ. *The encounter with a Catholic church building should be in some real way an encounter with Jesus Christ himself.*

49. The church building as described is *identifiably Catholic*. Like Christ, the Church is the light to the nations, “a city set on a mountain: a beacon to the whole world, bright

with the glory of the Lamb, and echoing the prayers of her saints” (Prayer for the Dedication of a Church). A Catholic church building that does not identify itself as Catholic does not proclaim Christ to the world: it is like the lamp placed under the bushel basket (see *Matthew* 5:15). Our church buildings also express and foster the catholicity of those living stones who make up the Church, the Body of Christ.

50. Because such an encounter with a Catholic church building – whether driving by, entering for the celebration of the liturgy, or approaching it in need of assistance – is an encounter with Christ himself, the church takes on the function of *evangelization*. Evangelization, says Pope John Paul II, always begins with an encounter with Christ, then leads to a conversion to him, and is followed by a life that proclaims Christ to the world (see, for example, *Ecclesia in America*, chapters II-IV). Far from being insignificant, our church buildings need to “signify and make visible the Church living in this place, the dwelling of God with men reconciled and united in Christ” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1180) such that Christ can be encountered in them.

51. The church building here described is not one of sumptuous display (*Sacrocanctum Concilium*, n. 123). On the contrary, a church built according to the requirements of the Catholic faith and liturgy is a model of stewardship. To be a good steward is to use wisely the resources entrusted to us, putting to use all elements of creation for the world’s redemption and the glory of God. “Let us do something beautiful for God,” Blessed Teresa of Calcutta was fond of saying. It is a matter of justice that the sacrifices of parishioners and benefactors result in a beautiful church, one that manifests Christ to our world. Even those who are unable to contribute monetarily to the building of the church, including the poor, have a right to expect their church to be beautiful, a sign of God in our midst. The earthly materials themselves “bless the Lord” when employed rightly in the church building. “For creation awaits with eager expectation the revelation of the children of God..., groaning in labor pains even until now” (*Romans* 8:19, 22). What greater glory could be given by creation than to participate in the work of beauty – the work of Christ – itself?

52. May all of our churches, whether big or small, rich or poor, old or new, be signs to the world of the saving person and work of our Savior, Jesus Christ, and an occasion to encounter him. May they be at the same time a prayer to God in the Holy Spirit, and a sign of our love and worship of God the Father for the gift of this same Jesus, his beloved Son.

Lord,
you built a holy Church,
founded upon the apostles
with Jesus Christ its cornerstone.
Grant that your people,
gathered in your name,
may fear and love you
and grow as the temple of your glory.
May they always follow you,
until, with you at their head,
they arrive at last in your heavenly city.
We ask this through Christ our Lord.
Amen.

From the Rite of Laying the Foundation Stone or
Beginning Work on the Building of a Church