

# Environment for Catholic Worship

## Part 9

### Place for Pastoral Musicians

We live in a culture where communal singing is reserved for very few events—birthdays, the national anthem at sporting events and moments of tragedy or loss. Yet since ancient times singing or chanting has been a part of most faith traditions in the world. Perhaps that is because singing involves so much more of one's body and breath than speech. There is a depth of meaning, emotion and conviction conveyed in singing that spoken words alone rarely match. St Augustine expressed it best when he claimed that those who sing pray twice.

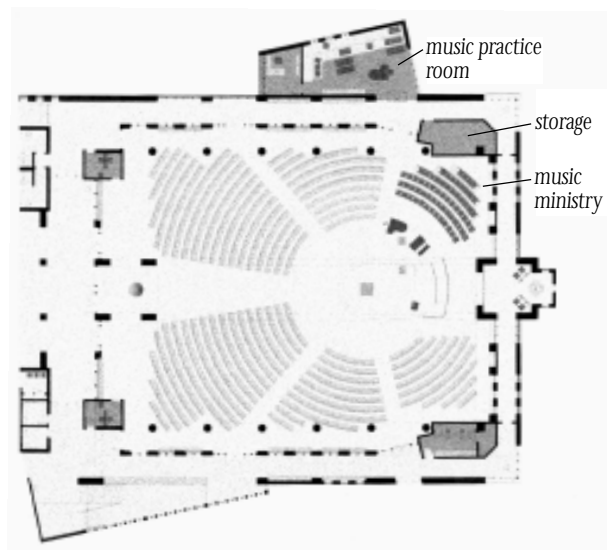
Jesus was well acquainted with the hymns and psalms of the Jewish tradition.

On the night before he died, at the end of his last meal with the twelve disciples, Jesus and his disciples sang a psalm before going out to the Mount of Olives. Even on the cross, Jesus utters the first phrase of Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"

The reforms of the liturgy at the Second Vatican Council ask that we recover an early tradition of singing by the entire assembly, a tradition that had been lost. For centuries, the assembly's sung voice was rarely heard in Catholic liturgy. Singing was reserved to choirs (generally men and/or boys) and in remote places (generally rear galleries). Now we speak of musical liturgy as the

norm, where choirs or cantors and instrumentalists encourage and lead their assemblies in the singing of hymns, acclamations and responses.

When considering the requirements that liturgical music



Space for the music ministry, practice room and storage. *St John the Apostle, Leesburg, VA (Proposed) Morgan Gick and Associates, Architect*

places on a space for worship, we must start with the room itself. In order for it to support the song of the assembly, there must be enough hard (reflective) surfaces to keep the sound alive for a few moments. When the room is too absorbent because of wall-to-wall carpeting, seat cushions and porous wall and ceiling surfaces, the assembly's singing and spoken responses are seriously handicapped. Careful attention to the design of the space will encourage the assembly's singing while allowing speech to be heard and understood clearly.

The pastoral musicians who serve the liturgy are also members of the assembly and should be seen as such, and be able to participate fully in the rites. The place for the cantor should be visible, though not as prominent as the ambo. Careful placement of the choir will allow its voice to be heard clearly throughout the worship space and yet not create a visual distraction.

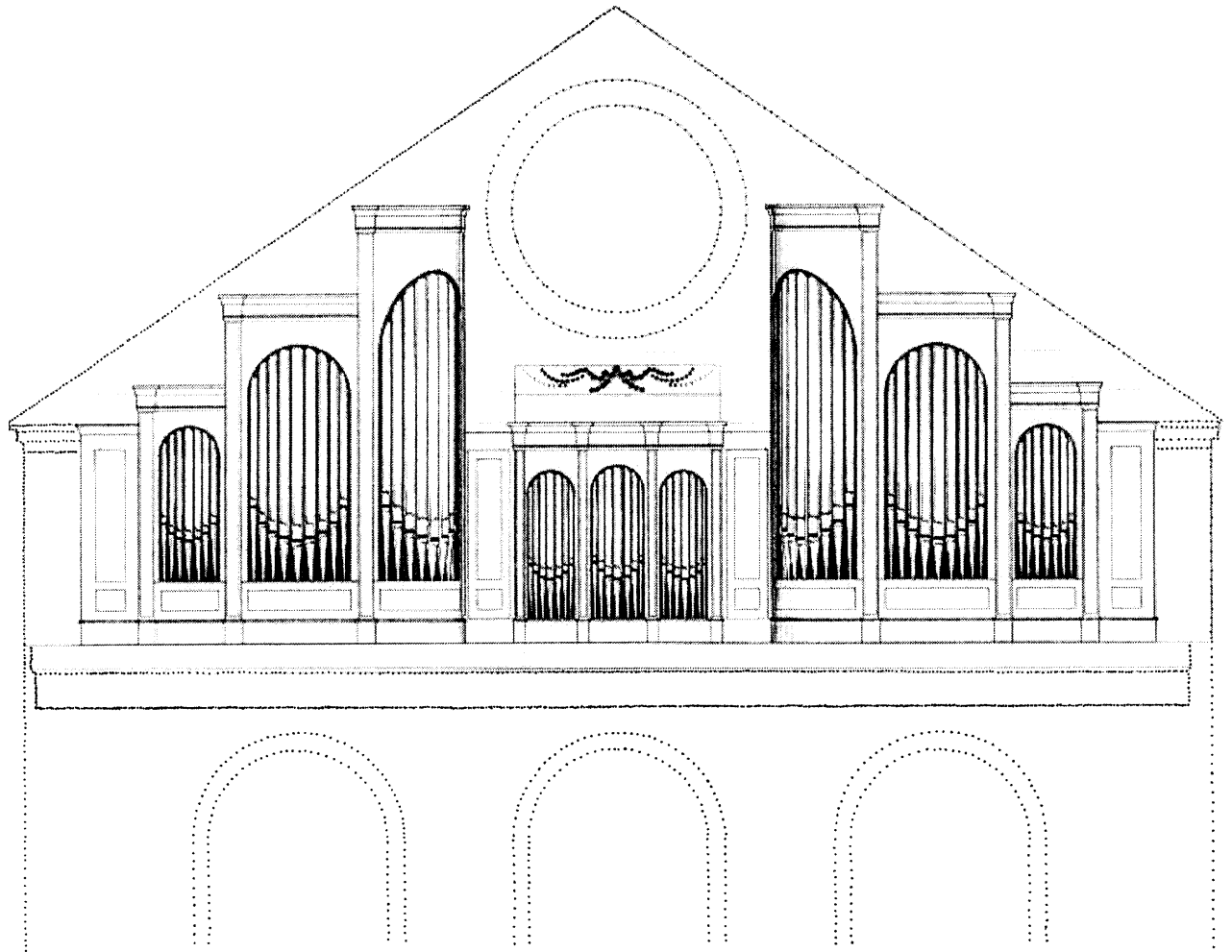
The musicians must be able to interact and, therefore, be in close proximity with each other and the source of the sound of the accompanying instruments. Sufficient space should be considered and planned for the addition of regular or occasional instrumentalists, and for the possibility of a pipe organ. A music rehearsal room nearby is also frequently considered in a new or renovated space.

## Excerpts from Built of Living Stones

Music is integral to the liturgy. It unifies those gathered to worship, supports the song of the congregation, highlights significant parts of the liturgical action, and helps to set the tone for each celebration. (MCW 232, GIRM 103) [88]

It is important to recognize that the building must support the music and song of the entire worshipping assembly. In addition, "some members of the community [have] special gifts [for] leading the [assembly in] musical praise and thanksgiving." (LMT 63) 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. (GRM 294) In addition, cantors and song leaders need visual contact with the music director while they themselves are visible to the rest of the congregation. (cf MCW 33-38) Apart from the singing of the Responsorial Psalm, which normally occurs at the ambo, the stand for the cantor or song leader is distinct from the ambo, which is reserved for the proclamation of the word of God. [89]

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. [90]



Pipe Organ. *Our Lady of Mercy Church, Potomac, MD.*  
Guilbault-Therrien, organbuilders, St Hyacinthe, Quebec

# Environment for Catholic Worship

## Part 10

### Art in the Service of the Liturgy

In a former convent, surrounded by a beautiful garden in a London neighborhood, Terebinth Trust was established as a Catholic social service agency to give safe shelter and counseling to women and their children fleeing abusive situations at home. The women were often unable to speak about their situations and were suspicious of living hopefully in light of their fears and past experiences.

As one way to help them surface their deep-seated feelings, the staff encouraged the women and children to paint. The results were simple, but astoundingly profound and beautiful images. When asked to describe their meaning, the women and children were able to speak for the first time about the trauma they experienced and what the future might hold for them.

There is something powerful in worthy art that reveals truth and beauty in a way that words alone cannot capture. Art placed in a liturgical setting has the power to help a community to remember and celebrate its relationship with God, who is beyond our complete understanding or ability to contain in words.

Unlike other ways in which we use art in modern life, liturgical art is not first about decoration. Images in a liturgical setting are another form of proclamation of the

message of the gospels—a visual parable—allowing us to see with new eyes. Just as the gospels call us to ongoing conversion and a change of heart, so too, images can confront our complacency and comfortable assumptions.

And unlike art that is created as a tribute to a famous person in society, worthy images of Mary and the saints can move beyond honor to give us some insight into the way in which they shared in the life and work of Christ and in the paschal mystery. We can see in these images a way in which we too might embrace Christ and become one with Christ in the Eucharist, as we are broken and poured out for those who are hungry and thirsty in our midst.

Since the liturgy is an action of Christ and the church, art in spaces for the Eucharist must foster, and never compete with, the principal symbols of the sacrificial meal and the full, active and conscious participation of all those present. The altar and the ambo will always be the most important furnishings in a space dedicated to the celebration of the Eucharist. Images and decorative elements should enhance and not detract from these central elements.

Parish communities have discovered that images can be placed in a variety of spaces throughout a church,

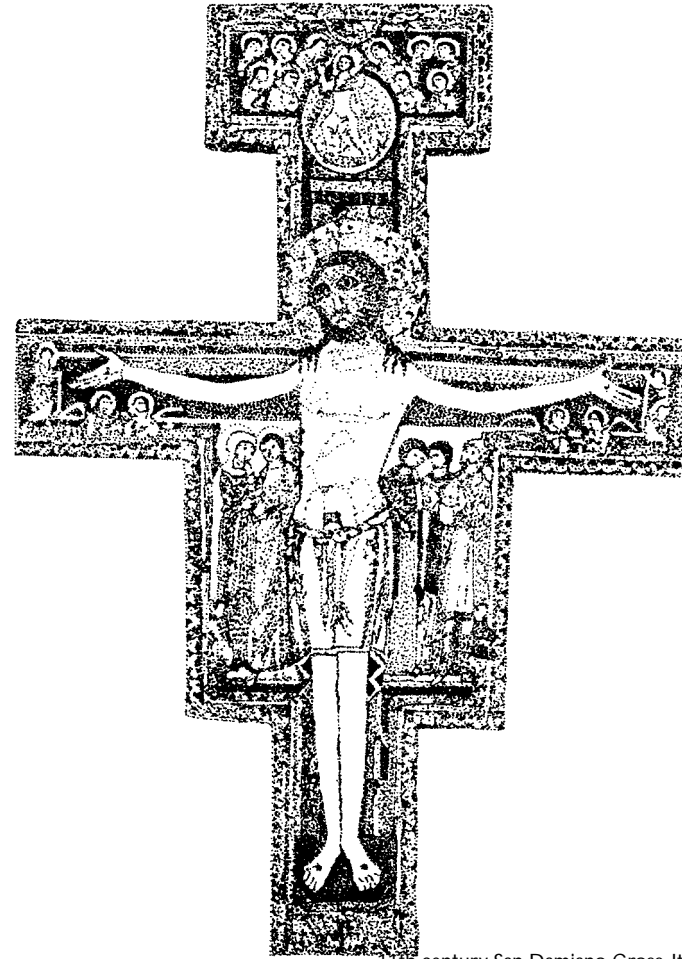


3<sup>rd</sup> century statue of the Good Shepherd

including the gathering space, devotional alcoves, chapels, meditation gardens and at the entrance.

On the walls surrounding the baptistery of a 3<sup>rd</sup> century house-church discovered in East Syria, an early Christian community painted primitive, but colorful depictions of stories from the old and new testaments to help them celebrate and remember what baptism means for the newly initiated and for the community. Images included Adam and Eve, the Samaritan woman at the well, the healing of the paralyzed man, St Peter's attempt to walk on the water and the three women who found the tomb empty. Also included was an image of the Good Shepherd, with a ram on his shoulders and a flock of sheep at his side.

Today, parish communities continue the long tradition of commissioning artists who create art that is truly beautiful and that communicates the weight of the mysteries that we celebrate. These images will not be trivial, but should, over time, unfold the truths that are revealed in the scriptures and the life of the living church.



11th century San Damiano Cross, Italy

## Excerpts from Built of Living Stones

Reflecting the awareness of the Communion of Saints, the practice of incorporating symbols of the Trinity, images of Christ, the Blessed Mother, the angels, and the saints into the design of a church creates a source of devotion and prayer for a parish community and should be part of the design of the church. (BB 1258) Images can be found in stained glass windows, on wall frescos and murals, and as statues and icons. Often these images depict scenes from the bible or from the lives of the saints and can be a source of instruction and catechesis as well as devotion. Since the Eucharist unites the Body

of Christ, including those who are not physically present, the use of images in the church reminds us that we are joined to all who have gone before us, as well as to those who now surround us. [135]

The placement of images can be a challenge, especially when a number of cultural traditions are part of a single parish community and each has its own devotional life and practices. Restraint in the number and prominence of sacred images (SC 125) is encouraged to help people focus on the liturgical action that is celebrated in the church. Separate alcoves for statues or icons can display

a variety of images through the year. Some parishes designate an area as the shrine for an image that is being venerated on a given day or for a period of time, such as the image of a saint on his or her feast day. [137]

Environment for Catholic Worship: Part 10 of 12, Page 2  
Author/Illustrator: Thomas V. Stehle, Liturgical Design Consultant  
©2003 FDLC 415 Michigan Avenue, NE, Suite 70, Washington, DC 20017. Phone: 202.635.6990; web: www.fdlc.org; email: publications@fdlc.org  
Built of Living Stones © 2000, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Inc. Washington, D.C. All rights reserved.