

Liturgical Principles for Locating the Music Ministry

This is the first of a two-part series on the music ministry in the liturgical environment. This article appeared in a slightly different format entitled “Concerns for Pastoral Musicians in Built of Living Stones” published in Pastoral Music, Volume 25, no.5, June-July 2001. Contact the National Association of Pastoral Musicians, 225 Sheridan St. NW, Washington, D.C. 20011-1452. Used with permission of the article’s author and the publication’s editor.

“The Living Church” is the first of four chapters in Built of Living Stones. It is presented as “a theological reflection on the liturgy and liturgical arts and architecture.” A key section of this chapter, subtitled “Liturgical Principles for Building or Renovating Churches,” presents some well-established liturgical factors as guiding principles for the design of the body of the church and, within that body, the spaces for the various ministries that serve the liturgy. In this regard, the document is very clear *in concept* about the principles that should guide the design of the worship space:

A variety of ministries serve the assembly at the liturgy. . . . As members of the Church, each person forms an essential and distinct part of the assembly that is gathered by God in an “organic and hierarchical” way. Each minister, ordained or lay, is called upon to fulfill his or her role and only that role in the celebration of the liturgy (no. 36).

By its design and furnishings, the church reflects this diversity of roles. The one who presides, those who proclaim God’s word, the ministers of music, those who assist at the altar, and members of the congregation all play an integral part in the public prayer of the Church. The entire design of the church should reflect the unity of the entire assembly and at the same time insure that each person is able to exercise his or her ministry in a space that fully accommodates the ritual action called for by that ministry (no. 37).

The overarching principles here are that the form of the church should, by design, reflect the diversity of roles and “at the same time” the unity of the entire assembly. These principles are general in the sense that they apply to all ministries in the liturgical assembly, including the ministry of music. Yet it will already be obvious to pastoral musicians that, because of the different spatial

and physical needs for music, these design principles will call for entirely different design strategies and design realizations to provide “a space that fully accommodates the ritual action called for by the [the music] ministry.”

A key to developing these concepts into a workable, buildable design hinges on two questions: (1) What specifically, is included in the ritual action called for by the music ministry? and (2) What are the specific features of a church building that are necessary to accommodate that action? The first of these questions is addressed in the opening paragraph of a section in Chapter Two, subtitled “The Place for the Pastoral Musicians” (nos. 88-90): “Music is integral to the liturgy. It unifies those gathered to worship, supports the song of the congregation, high-lights significant parts of the liturgical action, and helps to set the tone for each celebration” (no.88).

The ritual action of the music ministry, then, is to make these things manifest in liturgy, i.e., to make their music and the music of the full assembly “integral to the liturgy.” Yet in so doing, the music ministry must be ever mindful of doing this in the context of the gathered assembly, the abiding symbol of the church:

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.” 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 worshippers (no.89).

Clearly the special, God-given gifts of music, ministers are to be employed in facilitating their ministerial role in the liturgy. But this is to be done while maintaining and fostering the image of the assembly. This calls for a duality, a graceful dialogue of sorts wherein the ministers of music tread a fine line between membership and leadership (a liturgical *concerto grosso* of sorts). A parallel example of the dynamics here is the praying of the Lord’s Prayer. In the liturgy, the words leading up to this prayer are spoken by the presider alone. And, in initiating this communal prayer, the first words of the

prayer are usually most strongly voiced by the presider. But, within a few words, the full assembly has joined in, and the voice of the presider is no longer the strongest voice; the presider’s role as leader is seamlessly transformed to a new responsibility as one member of the whole assembly. Many presidors will, sensitively, turn off their microphones or lower their voices to facilitate and strengthen the transition.

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Note: More on Music Ministry in the next Newsletter