

Liturgical Principles for Locating the Music Ministry

This is the second of a two-part series on the music ministry in the liturgical environment. Quotations are from Built of Living Stones (see note on page 6). This article appeared in a slightly different format entitled “Concerns for Pastoral Musicians in Built of Living Stones” published in Pastoral

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.

With this liturgical focus on the gathered assembly as a guiding principle, it is often suggested that the music ministry can be placed as an integral part of the assembly seating, i.e., simply using a section of pews or chairs that might otherwise appear to be just another section of congregation seating. This concept evokes the appropriate imagery and symbolism, and it may, in fact, be done in certain settings, particularly when small numbers are involved. With a ten-voice choir, an acoustic guitar, a flute, and a 500-member assembly, this may be an entirely workable solution. But, with a thirty-voice choir, piano, organ, music stands, risers, and other resources for music ministry serving a 1,000-member assembly, the notion of a music ministry carved out of the assembly seating area becomes problematic and, often, altogether unworkable for several reasons:

- (1) All of the accouterments needed to make music can present a substantial physical and visual imposition for the rest of the assembly;
- (2) The loudness level of such a large group of musicians is probably too great for assembly members seated in the immediate vicinity;
- (3) Surrounding the music ministry with the assembly members, and not sound-reflecting surfaces, eliminates beneficial and necessary sound reflections that would otherwise be provided by solid walls.

While *LIVING STONES* does not specifically address congregational and ministry size issues—a modern problem—it does so indirectly by explicitly situating itself in our immediate milieu: It is a document intended for this place, this time, and this culture. “Catholics who live and worship in the United States in the twenty-first century celebrate a liturgy that is the same as that of earlier generations in all its essentials but significantly different in its language, style, and form” (no.4).

One of the realities of Catholic worship in the United States at the beginning of the millennium is that the overwhelming majority of new Catholic churches are larger than in former generations, and many renovations are done to expand seating capacity. Larger churches generally engender larger music ministries. With this in mind, and acknowledging the physical and practical limitations for large music ministries stated above, it may be better to pose the question of placement another way. We should not ask how we place the music ministry so that they are perceived to be part of the whole assembly, but how we place them in a setting that

will facilitate their ministerial role with a minimum (ideally no) semblance of separation from the assembly.

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 (no. 90).

Another opportunity for locating the music ministry in a setting not contiguous with the congregation is suggested even earlier in the document: “the ministers of music could also be located in the body of the church since they lead the entire assembly in song as well as by the example of their reverent attention and prayer” (no. 51).

The language here (particularly the word “could”) is noteworthy and emblematic of a consistent tendency in this document to allow for a variety of solutions and compromises in addressing the often hard-to-reconcile roles of pastoral musicians as ministers and assembly members. It is often extremely difficult to find one location that facilitates both equally, especially in large worship spaces.

While this review has not presented all the statements in *LIVING STONES* about the location of the music ministry, it is clear that the concepts of pastoral musicians as ministers to the assembly have been carried over from *ENVIRONMENT AND ART IN CATHOLIC WORSHIP*. And, as in that earlier document, the specifics of how to implement this in a Catholic church building, new or renovated, are not clearly defined. Rather, as its opening statement affirms, *LIVING STONES* offers “suggestions and guidelines” to serve as the basis for decision making.

Dennis Fleisher