

Confessionals

Liturgical Guidelines for the Diocese of Arlington

1. “In the sacrament of penance, God forgives sins and restores broken relationships through the ministry of the Church. ... By its design, furnishings, and location within the church building, the place for reconciliation can assist penitents on the path to contrition and sorrow for sin and to proclaim their reconciliation with God and the community of faith.”¹

2. According to universal law, “the proper place for hearing sacramental confessions is a church or oratory,”² and “except for a just reason, confessions are not to be heard elsewhere than in a confessional.”³

Construction and Renovation

3. In the construction or renovation of confessionals, the liturgical principles for building or renovating churches provided by the bishops of the United States should be applied to the confessional: that the confessional is designed in harmony with church laws and serves the needs of the Sacrament of Penance, that the design of the confessional reflects the roles of the penitent and confessor, that the confessional respects the culture of every time and place, and that the confessional should be beautiful.⁴

4. Further, the guidance of the bishops of the United States on the selection of suitable material should be followed: “While traditional building materials have served the Church well in the past, more recently developed materials and building techniques might better serve a contemporary structure. In all instances, the [structure] that is designed for an extended life will need fine, durable materials. The use of materials available locally and of designs that are expressive of local culture can be an advantage to parishes. Faithful stewardship of the earth’s resources demands that the Church be a partner in the development of a sustainable architecture.”⁵

5. The specific norms and guidelines given below are to be followed.

¹ National [United States] Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Built of Living Stones: Art, Architecture, and Worship; Guidelines of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops*, 2000, nos. 103-104. Henceforth cited as BLS.

² *Code of Canon Law*, 1984, can. 964.1. Henceforth cited as CCL.

³ CCL, can. 964.3.

⁴ BLS, nos. 27-45.

⁵ BLS, nos. 215-216.

Structural Design

6. According to universal law, confessionals must be located in an open place and must be able to be used freely by the faithful.⁶ Further, according to particular law of the United States, “provision must be made in each church or oratory for a sufficient number of places for sacramental confessions,” and the confessionals must be “truly accessible.”⁷

7. Following the guidance of the bishops of the United States, “special attention should be given to individuals with visual or hearing impairments, to those who have difficulty walking or who are in wheelchairs, and to the elderly with frailties.”⁸ Braille signs, appropriate forms of amplification for the hearing impaired (with due respect for the secrecy of the confessional), ramps, accessible doors, and sufficient space to accommodate wheelchairs are encouraged wherever possible.⁹

Interior of the Confessional

8. According to universal law, confessionals must be “fitted with a fixed grille between the penitent and the confessor.”¹⁰

9. In accordance with the same law, the penitent may legitimately decide that the sacramental confession be enacted behind a fixed grille. Likewise, the minister of the Sacrament of Penance, with just cause and excluding cases of necessity, may legitimately decide, even if the penitent strongly desires otherwise, that the sacramental confession be enacted in a confessional equipped with a fixed grille.¹¹

10. According to particular law of the United States, “provision should also be made for penitents who wish to confess face-to-face.”¹²

11. In providing a space for face-to-face confession, prudent consideration should be given to means of protecting both confessor and penitent, especially from any possible accusations of impropriety. Therefore, a solid, fixed barrier of approximately three feet in height should be situated between the penitent and confessor. The space over the barrier may be open completely, it may have slats, it may be a wall with an open window, or it may be a wall with a window containing slats.

12. As noted above, universal law allows either the confessor or the penitent to determine that confession take place behind the fixed grille (see no. 9). Therefore, a door, sliding screen, curtain, or similar structure may be placed in the space above the barrier for face-to-face confession (described in no. 11). By fitting this door, screen, or curtain in a manner that allows the confessor

⁶ CCL, can. 964.2.

⁷ National [United States] Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Complementary Norm to canon 964.2 of the Code of Canon Law*, 20 October 2000. Cf. CCL, can. 264.2.

⁸ BLS, nos. 212.

⁹ Cf. BLS, no. 105, 212.

¹⁰ CCL, can. 964.2.

¹¹ See CCL, can. 965.2; Pontifical Council for the Interpretation of Legislative Texts, *Responsio ad propositum dubium: de loco excipiendi sacramentales confessiones [Response to a proposed question: on the place for hearing sacramental confession]*, 7 July 1998, *Acta Apostolicae Sedes* 90 (1998): 711.

¹² *Complementary Norm to canon 964.2 of the Code of Canon Law*. Cf. CCL, can. 264.2.

to close and secure it, the confessor can thus make the fixed grille the only manner available for celebration.¹³ Ordinarily, the penitent's choice for confession behind the grille is preserved by arranging the fixed grille near the entrance of the confessional in such a way that the confessor cannot see the penitent as he or she enters and kneels behind the grille.

Secrecy of the Confessional

13. The confessional should be equipped with appropriate soundproofing in order to protect the secrecy of the confessional.¹⁴

14. With due regard for the secrecy of the confessional, prudent consideration should be given to means of protecting both confessor and penitent, especially from any possible accusations of impropriety. Therefore, the confessional should include a glass panel. A glass panel may fittingly be placed in or near each door of the confessional. The size and transparency of the glass panel should balance the secrecy of the confessional with the protection of both confessor and penitent.

Additional Considerations

15. Lighting should be warm and inviting, welcoming penitents who seek God's help.¹⁵

16. Confessionals should be in compliance with building codes. "Timely planning can help to reconcile these required elements with liturgical, devotional, and artistic focal points."¹⁶

Sacred Furnishings and Art

17. As a space for the celebration of the Church's liturgy, the confessional should be furnished and embellished in accordance with the relevant prescriptions and guidelines of the liturgy.

18. As the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council teach, "The Church has not adopted any particular style of art as her very own; she has admitted styles from every period according to the natural talents and circumstances of peoples, and the needs of the various rites. Thus, in the course of the centuries, she has brought into being a treasury of art which must be very carefully preserved. The art of our own days, coming from every race and region, shall also be given free scope in the Church, provided that it adorns the sacred buildings and holy rites with due reverence and honor; thereby it is enabled to contribute its own voice to that wonderful chorus of praise in honor of the Catholic faith sung by great men in times gone by."¹⁷

¹³ In this way, the permanent structure of the confessional provides for the opportunity for face-to-face confession, in accordance with particular law for the United States, for any confessor who wishes to celebrate in this manner.

¹⁴ Cf. BLS, no. 105.

¹⁵ Cf. BLS, no. 105.

¹⁶ BLS, no. 232.

¹⁷ Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 4 December 1963, *Acta Synodalia* 2/6, 409-497, no. 123.

Sacred Furnishings

19. The instructions on furnishings found in the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* apply equally well to the Sacrament of Penance and the confessional: “In choosing materials for sacred furnishings, besides those which are traditional, others are admissible that, according to the mentality of our own age, are considered to be noble and are durable, and well suited for sacred use. In the Dioceses of the United States of America these materials may include wood, stone, or metal which are solid and appropriate to the purpose for which they are employed.”¹⁸

20. A chair or bench should be provided for the confessor. Following Roman custom, a kneeler may be placed before the fixed grille on the penitent’s side of the confessional. Recent practice suggests that a chair or bench also be provided on the penitent’s side for use when confession is celebrated face-to-face.¹⁹

21. A table for the confessor’s requisites—such as a violet stole and the *Rite of Penance*—is fitting. Since the Order of Penance includes the reading of Sacred Scripture, a table with a Bible for the penitent is also fitting.²⁰ The penitent’s table, or another suitable piece of furniture, may also hold liturgical aids—such as outlines of the Order of Penance or texts of the Act of Contrition—that are worthy in material and appearance.

Sacred Art

22. Following the guidelines of the bishops of the United States, “authentic art is integral to the Church at prayer because these objects and actions are ‘signs and symbols of the supernatural world’ and expressions of the divine presence. While personal tastes will differ, parish committees should utilize the criteria of *quality* and *appropriateness* [for liturgical action] in evaluating art for worship.”²¹

23. Symbols, icons, and images that embellish the confessional should “assist penitents on the path to contrition and sorrow for sin” and “proclaim their reconciliation with God and the community of faith.”²² “Appropriate artwork, a crucifix symbolic of Christ’s victory over sin and death, icons or images reflective of baptism and the Eucharist, or Scriptural images of God’s reconciling love help to enhance the atmosphere of prayer.”²³

24. The choice and placement of symbols, icons, and images in the confessional should be guided by the general advice of the bishops of the United States: to respect traditional iconography, to be mindful that the tradition is not limited to literal images, to exercise restraint in the number and prominence of sacred images, to employ images in a manner that helps the faithful focus on the

¹⁸ *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, nos. 325-326, in the *Roman Missal*, third typical edition, 2010 (published 2011).

¹⁹ Cf. BLS, no. 105.

²⁰ Cf. BLS, no. 105.

²¹ BLS, no. 146.

²² BLS, nos. 103-104.

²³ Cf. BLS, no. 105.

liturgical action, and to choose and place images of the saints based on the tradition of the Church, the patrons of the parish or diocese, and the devotion of the faithful.²⁴

Care for Sacred Space

25. The confessional should be kept clean, orderly, and free from extraneous items. Furnishings and art should be given regular attention so that they remain worthy of the Church's liturgy. Books, especially the *Rite of Penance* and the Bible, should be maintained with care and due reverence. Liturgical aids should be updated and replaced as necessary in order to preserve the dignity and beauty of the liturgical celebration.

Communal Celebrations of Penance

26. When large numbers of confessors and penitents participate in the Sacrament of Penance, especially during Advent and Lent, additional rooms or spaces may be required.²⁵

27. Every effort should be made to provide for both anonymous confession (at the preference of either confessor or penitent) and face-to-face confession. Proper confessionals should be made available, and in other spaces, chairs and kneelers should be arranged appropriately.

28. The privacy required for the Sacrament of Penance can be preserved through the prudent arrangement of spaces and use of music.

29. The norms and guidelines given above for accessibility, lighting, building codes, sacred furnishings, sacred art, and care for sacred space should be adapted for the setting of communal celebrations.

This document is promulgated by the Most Reverend Michael F. Burbidge, Bishop of Arlington, on October 24, 2019, and is effective immediately in the Diocese of Arlington.

²⁴ Cf. BLS, nos. 135-138.

²⁵ Cf. BLS, no. 105; CCL, can. 964.3.

Given in Arlington on October 24, 2019 by:

Handwritten signature of Michael F. Burbidge in blue ink, written over a horizontal line.

Most Reverend Michael F. Burbidge
Bishop of Arlington

Witness by:

Handwritten signature of Jamie R. Workman in blue ink, written over a horizontal line.

Reverend Jamie R. Workman, J.C.L.
Chancellor