

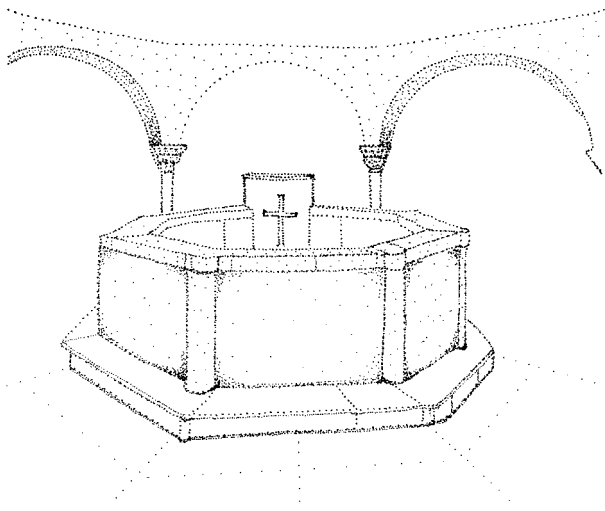
# Environment for Catholic Worship

## Part 6

### The Baptistry

A cool drink, a raging torrent, a gentle drizzle, the depths of the ocean or a warm bath. How can something so powerful and devastating as water be so refreshing and vital to life? In the ancient world, water was long considered with fire, earth and wind one of four basic elements of life. Just as water held a tremendous significance for ancient religions, so also for us Christians. Water is the matter of our first sacrament that brings about incorporation, reconciliation and restoration. Both St John and St Paul speak of the water of baptism as both womb and tomb. It marks the death of the old self and the rebirth into a life in Christ. In baptism, God forgives sin and incorporates a new member into the Body of Christ.

Sacraments transform common elements of human life and experience to create a new reality for the believer. The outward signs of these sacraments should be felt, seen, heard, tasted and smelled. They should be ample signs, never defined by “only what is necessary.” In the sacrament of baptism, this is best expressed by the sight and sound of a significant body of water that is visible and even audible.



5<sup>th</sup> century Orthodox Baptistry, Ravenna, Italy

**History of the Baptistry** A room for baptism can be found in one of the earliest known spaces used for worship—a third century house—church in East Syria. There it was decorated with scenes of Adam and Eve, Noah's ark, Christ healing the paralytic and Christ as young shepherd. As Christian communities grew in size and from region to region, baptistries varied in shape

(round, hexagonal and octagonal) in scale, and in placement within or just outside a church. Many were large enough to allow adults to enter and be either fully or partially submerged.

Baptismal pools or fonts have always been given a place of prominence, commonly near the entrance to the church. As centuries progressed and liturgical practice was marked by a sacramental minimalism in the use of the outward signs associated with them, baptismal fonts tended to be reduced in size and prominence within the church. Often a very small amount of water was dripped over the head of infants or adults.

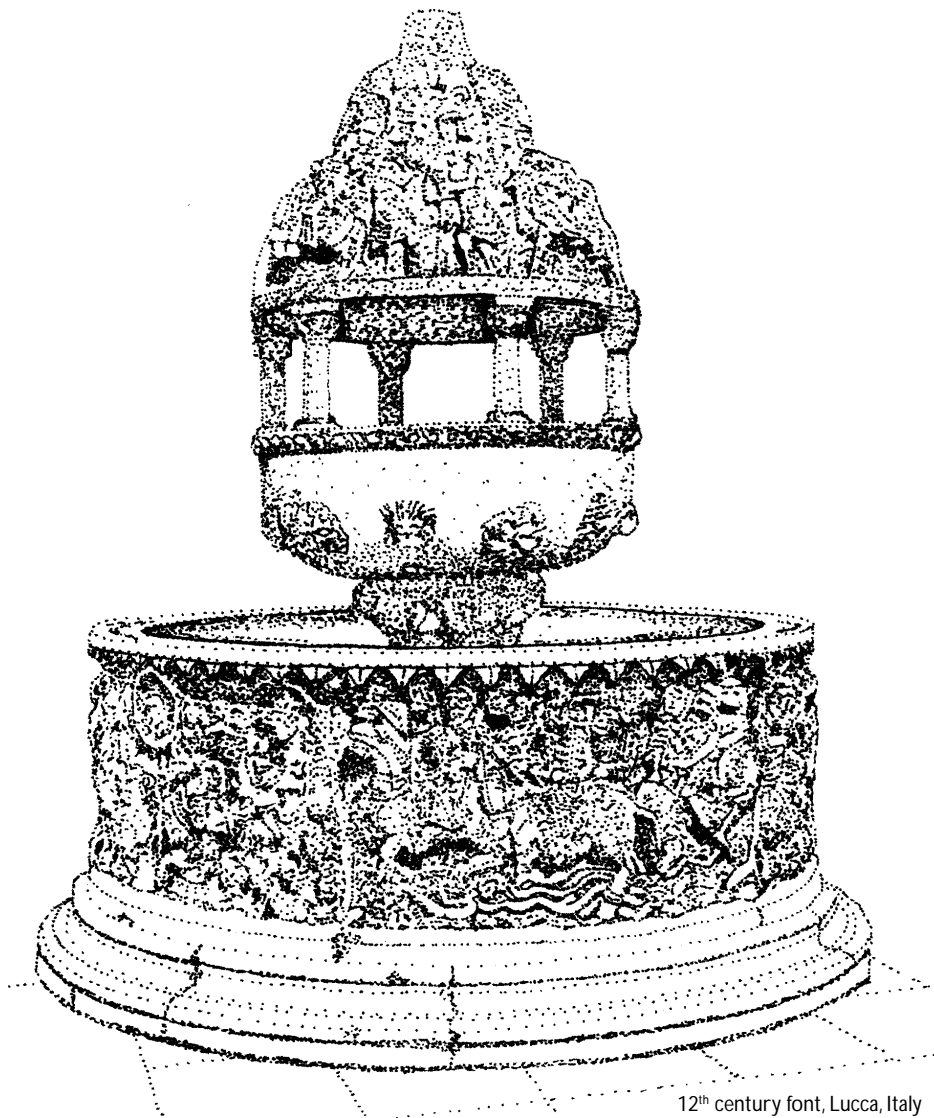
In the reform of the liturgy, there has been a recovery of earlier practices, including the baptism of adults and children by immersion. Baptismal pools are frequently placed in the main path of entry to the church allowing participants to mark themselves with the sign of the cross to recall their own baptism—the first and foundational sacrament in the life of a Christian. Additionally, this placement at the entrance strengthens the imagery invoked at the beginning of every funeral when the baptism of the deceased is recalled.

## Excerpts from Built of Living Stones

The rites of baptism, the first of the sacraments of initiation, require a prominent place for celebration. (RCIA, General Introduction, no 25) Initiation into the Church is entrance into a eucharistic community united in Jesus Christ. Because the rites of initiation of the Church begin with baptism and are completed by the reception of the Eucharist, the baptismal font and its location reflect the Christian's journey through the waters of baptism to the altar. This integral relationship between the baptismal font and the altar can be demonstrated in a variety of ways, such as placing the font and altar on the same architectural axis, using natural or artificial lighting, using the same floor patterns, and using common or similar materials and elements of design. [66]

The following criteria can be helpful when choosing the design for the font:

1. One font that will accommodate the baptism of both infants and adults symbolizes the one faith and one baptism that Christians share....
2. The font should be large enough to supply ample water for the baptism of both adults and infants....
3. Baptism is a sacrament of the whole Church and, in particular, of the local parish community....
4. The location of the baptistry will determine how, and how actively, the entire liturgical assembly can participate in the rite of baptism....
5. Because of the essential relationship of baptism to the celebration of other sacraments and rituals, the parish will want to choose an area for the baptistry or the font that visually symbolizes that relationship....
6. With the restoration of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults that culminates in baptism at the Easter Vigil, churches need private spaces where the newly baptized can go immediately after their baptism to be clothed in their white garments and to prepare for the completion of initiation in the Eucharist. ...[69]



12<sup>th</sup> century font, Lucca, Italy