

## Adapting Fonts for Immersion

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Photos by the author



1. In the gathering space: St. Gregory the Great Church, Bellerose NY.

**M**any years ago, I was asked to design a new font large enough to accommodate the baptism of adults by immersion which would include the church's original green marble infant-sized font. Several weeks after the project was completed, a few droplets of water began to appear under the original marble bowl. This leak was later determined to be an existing fissure in the stone, but since we had had the bowl in our possession for several weeks it was considered our responsibility. The leak was soon stopped and the font holds water to this day, but not before the pastor nicknamed me "Leaky Larry." Since then I have dedicated a good portion of my professional life to creating beautiful baptismal fonts that absolutely do not leak!

In many parishes, especially those with significant or beautiful fonts originally intended for the baptism of infants by affusion (pouring), there is a great debate about whether to include the original font (or parts of it) into a new pool of immersion. Immersion pools are very desirable because of the inherent beauty of the fuller symbolism: The lavish use of water evokes all the water images of scripture, and speaks clearly of baptism as washing, drowning and being born. But, all too often, especially in the 1970s and early 1980s, fonts were installed only to begin leaking or otherwise function improperly. These problems prompted the bishop of one New York diocese to release a directive to all pastors recommending that immersion pools not be built in any newly constructed or renovated churches—despite the fact that liturgical law clearly calls

for this. Another response for parishes has been to purchase mass-produced fonts of synthetic materials which approach the cost

of a custom-designed font but often lack the unique beauty of one. Neither of these solutions is best.

What then is a parish to do? Fortunately, after years of experimentation, designers and architects are now finding that with just the right combination of design and technology, a font can be beautiful and function perfectly. The first step is to consider where the font is best placed within the total environment for liturgy, and then address questions of size and shape.

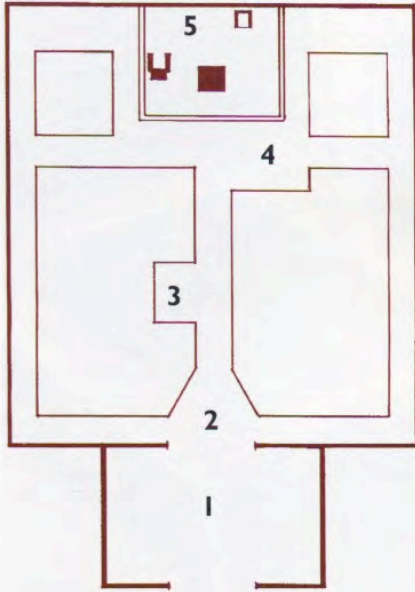
**Location and Size** Historically, baptistries were buildings entirely separate from the building we call "the church," that is, the hall for eucharist, and these baptistries contained relatively deep pools. When fonts were brought inside the church proper, they lost their sense of place. In the 16th century, Saint Charles Borromeo, archbishop of Milan, issued a directive for his diocese that fonts belonged in baptistries located inside the church building, off the main entrance. That became a popular location in churches built after the Reformation.

Fonts began to diminish in size early, beginning in the 6th century in northern Europe. As Europe became more Christian, adult baptism became rare, and chilly spring-times invited the use of less water at Easter for the baptism of babies.

Since Vatican II, fonts again need to accommodate adult baptism by immersion. It is not unusual to see some pools as large as ten feet across, although a font can be as small as three and a half feet square to allow for the pouring of the water over the head of an adult. Ultimately, the size of the baptismal font is determined by its location in the church building and the way the parish celebrates the ritual.

Today, where should the baptismal font be? In the construction of a new church, the font can be placed almost anywhere. But in renovating an existing building, other factors, such as the potential loss of seats, which entrance is de facto the main entrance, and the availability of potential spaces for a baptistry, need to be taken into account in





The diagram shows five possible locations for the font: (1) in a separate baptistry (or narthex); (2) at the main door; (3) in the center of the nave; (4) between the assembly's seats and the altar; (5) in the sanctuary.

determining location. If the font is to have a drain, the placement of the font is both a liturgical and functional consideration. It is also important for the recirculating system to be located below and as close to the new font as possible.

It's possible to generalize and speak of five possible locations for a font: in a room separate from the main worship space, perhaps the gathering space; in the center aisle of the worship space, at the main entrance; in the center of the assembly's area, perhaps off the center aisle to facilitate processions; between the assembly's seats and the altar; in the case of a renovation, at a former side altar. (See the diagram above.)

**Design and Materials** Once the place and size are established, the font's design depends on whether it is to be built from scratch or if it will incorporate any existing pieces from the church. Sometimes an existing infant-size font is a genuine piece of art,

worthy of being reused. Sometimes it's of great sentimental value to a parish, so it is incorporated into the new font. If an extant font's bowl is to be used, often it needs to be enlarged to add a sluice (or spout) and piping for water: Usually water flows from this smaller bowl into the larger pool. A creative approach to the design makes it possible to include other appointments such as the paschal candle or ambry for holy oils in the new baptistry.

The font's shape and materials should have some relation to the other sanctuary furnishings and the architecture of the church. The chosen materials also have to be suitable for underwater use. Granite, copper or bronze, glass and some types of ceramic tile and marble can be used. It is important to seal all underlays with a waterproofing membrane and use only high-grade waterproof epoxy as an adhesive. This should prevent any leaking for many, many years. The Tile Council of America publishes a handbook for tile installation that provides some very useful construction details for fabrication and waterproofing.

2. In the center, on axis with the altar: St. Francis De Sales Church, New York NY.



3. In the center of the assembly: Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church, South Ozone Park NY.





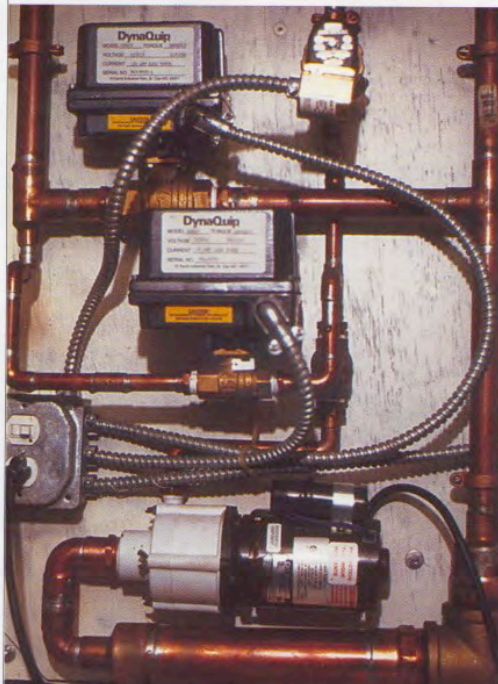
4. Between altar and assembly: Our Lady of the Lake Church, Holland MI.



5. At a former side altar: St. Francis Assisi Church, Mt. Kisco NY.

Other trade organizations and local building departments can provide additional necessary information.

**Plumbing** The recirculating system and plumbing are a bit more technical. Although these are not especially difficult to install, they can be tricky the first time around.



Peter Scurlock's recirculating system designed specifically for baptismal fonts.

At Renovata Studios, we have spent a lot of time educating plumbers and engineers on the specific requirements of the baptismal font with a pool of immersion. Some churches have tried to adapt the pumps and filters used for hot tubs or swimming pools, but these do not work well, being designed for a far greater water flow. Beware the Niagara Falls effect when the water flows in a torrent. The sound will disturb some people and will certainly make pastors and liturgists nervous about the whole project.

Peter Scurlock, co-president of Renovata Studios, has developed a recirculating system specifically for baptismal fonts. (See photo at left.) This system includes a pump with adjustable water flow, electric heater, removable cartridge filter and electronic control valves. The entire system is connected to a ground fault interrupt circuit that ensures safety from shock. The system is controlled by four standard wall switches near the font. One switch allows the water to fill the font and another one drains it.



The other two operate the recirculation pump and heater.

**Examples** Here are examples of fonts built in the five various locations in a church, using a variety of materials. In terms of cost, the examples here ranged from about \$9,000 to \$20,000.

**1. In the gathering space** (photo 1, page 116). This font for the Church of St. Gregory the Great is designed for people to gather around. It offers a different experience from each side, with a special emphasis on the living water flowing through and out of the clear crystal bowl. The cast crystal supports for the bowl rest on a solid block of onyx black granite. The pool of immersion is of Wausau red and black granite, which matches the altar and ambo in this church. Resting on a block of red granite is a bronze and glass ambry containing the sacred chrism. The oil of catechumens and the oil of the sick are in separate ambries on the nearby walls of the gathering space. The paschal candle stands in a movable holder on the font and can be placed next to the ambo for the Easter season. A symbol of the Holy Spirit in cast crystal is suspended above the font.

**St. Gregory the Great Church**

Rev. Joseph L. Cunningham, Pastor  
242–20 88th Avenue  
Bellerose NY 11426

**Materials:** Crystal glass bowl with cast crystal supports. Wausau red granite and crystal black granite, cast crystal dove, bronze ambry and paschal candle stand.

**Dimensions:** Ht. 36" L. 84" W. 48" D. 18"

**Completed:** 5/96

**Designer:** Lawrence R. Hoy,  
Renovata Studios, Inc.

**Fabricator:** Peter C. Scurlock,  
Renovata Studios, Inc.

**Liturgical design consultant:**

Robert E. Rambusch,  
Robert E. Rambusch Associates,  
One Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10003

**2. In the center aisle at the entrance to the nave** (photo 2, page 117). The font for St. Francis De Sales Church welcomes one into this inner-city parish church. The new design incorporates the original marble font from the church. The two-section bowl was opened up into one large bowl and a spout of Chelmsford granite was added. The new pool of immersion of the same granite is a traditional octagon, allowing for easy circulation around the font. The walls of the pool are about the same height as a bathtub, which makes it easy to step in and out.

**St. Francis De Sales Church**

Rev. Robert V. Lott, STM, Pastor  
135 E. 96th Street  
New York NY 10128

**Materials:** Chelsea gray granite, polished and thermal finish, existing Carrara marble infant-sized font.

**Dimensions:** Ht. 39" L. 60" W. 60" D. 12"

**Completed:** 4/92

**Liturgical designer:** Lawrence R. Hoy,  
Renovata Studios, Inc.

**Fabricator:** Peter C. Scurlock,  
Renovata Studios, Inc.

**3. In the middle of the nave just off the center aisle** (photo 3, page 117). This large font designed for Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church has a Dakota mahogany granite bowl and pool with three water sluices, so that the flowing water can be seen from all sides as one enters the nave. The bowl is large enough for the immersion of a large infant, and the pool will accommodate both a priest and an adult for baptism. The paschal candle and holy oils ambry are both mounted on a block of granite opposite the bowl. Under each glass vessel is a small light which illuminates the oil. This design creates a gesture toward the center aisle that invites people to the font.