

Handbook for Parish Art & Environment

THEOLOGY

The Second Vatican Council calls for the “full, active, and conscious participation” of the people in the liturgy. The purpose of any environment for worship is to facilitate this goal in the celebration of the liturgy. The environment serves the liturgy best when there is ample space for all that the rites call for: a place to assemble around the altar for the eucharist, a place to celebrate baptism, a place for the community to gather for special occasions and to begin processions, and a place to celebrate reconciliation.

There needs to be ample space, with appropriate furnishings, for presiders, lectors, music ministry and instruments, for communion ministers, acolytes, and ministers of hospitality to carry out the various liturgical ministries.

Besides being an appropriate place for the community’s worship and its ministry of witness and service, the physical environment is a place that shows hospitality, sacredness, mystery, beauty, dignity, and authenticity.

The most important activity of any parish community is its worship, that is, the celebration of the eucharist, the other sacraments, and other official rites of the Church. The celebration of the liturgy, particularly the Sunday eucharist, is the heart of any parish.

HISTORY

When we use the word “church,” we are really speaking first of all about people, the People of God. When Jesus was asked about rebuilding the temple in three days, he pointed out that he was referring to his body, a living temple. We too, as members of Christ’s body through baptism, are the dwelling place of God, and therefore we are a holy people.

A church building then is a “house for the Church,” the place where the holy people of God do holy things. The building is a sacred place because God is present in God’s people and because of what these people do there: they hear the word of God, they pray together, they participate in the eucharist, they celebrate initiation, reconciliation, marriages, and they bury the dead.

In the first few centuries after the resurrection of Jesus, the Christians gathered in homes to celebrate the eucharist. In time a special “house-church” became the designated place for their gathering.

In the fourth century, when more space was needed because the communities had become larger, the

Christians began to use “basilicas,” the public assembly halls of the time. There the Christians had ample space to gather, to stand - men and women together - to hear the word of God proclaimed among them, and to bring a table into their midst for the celebration of Jesus’ sacrifice.

In the Middle Ages, there was a major shift in this arrangement: the table (altar) was moved out from among the people and toward one end and eventually against the wall. This area, the *chancel* (the “sanctuary”), became the place where all liturgical ministry took place. The people remained where they were, in the nave, but now they no longer participated; they had become separated from the liturgical action and were mere spectators.

This basic arrangement was maintained into the early twentieth century, even though various architectural styles, such as Romanesque, baroque, Gothic, etc., shaped the building.

The Second Vatican Council, through its reform of the liturgy, called for a reordering of this arrangement. The liturgy is now celebrated by the gathered community, not just by those who are in the altar area.

THE ENVIRONMENT OF ART.

Liturgy is more than words and gestures. It is our experience of music, words, smoke, censer, fire, darkness, bowing, sitting, standing, art, smells, visual forms – it is everything that touches our senses as we pray. Therefore, our liturgy’s environment is more than the arrangement of flowers and furnishings. It is everything we see, hear, smell, taste, touch or sense in any way with our bodies. The environment is:

- ▶ Aural: everything we hear – music: voice, instrumental, choral, a cappella; voices: pace, cadence, inflection, timbre;
- ▶ Gustatory: everything we taste – bread, wine;
- ▶ Olfactory: everything we smell – incense, beeswax, flowers, bread and wine, wood;
- ▶ Kinesthetic: our physical movements – our body awareness of movement and proximity to other elements of physical environment; acts such as processing, marking self with the sign of the cross, handshakes and embraces at the peace, standing, sitting, kneeling, genuflecting, eating, drinking;
- ▶ Tactile: everything we touch – baptismal water, hymnals, ritual books, other persons, the cup, wine, bread;
- ▶ Visual: everything we see – walkways, landscape, doors, vestibules, seats, baptismal pool and water, ambo, altar table, architectural structures and shapes, other persons, light, colors, textures.

UNITY

The space should convey a sense of oneness, of being the gathering of the baptized. The liturgical ministers serve the community’s worship action. The areas designed for different ministerial functions within the liturgy must be clearly seen as part of the one community.

Not only should there be a unity expressed in the architecture that surrounds the gathering community, but

that same unity should be seen in the decorations we use to enhance our worship. The environment is more than the sanctuary, it also includes the community's space from the parking lot to the pew. Together, architecture and art should complement each other never compete.

BALANCE

Simplicity should guide the work of the parish art and environment committee. "Less is more," is the adage to follow. Plan for the year, each season demands its own part of the committee's budget. Easter should have the greater portion, but not at the denial of any other season.

The placement of seasonal decorations and commissioned art should also be balanced between all the areas in which the community gathers. However, multiplication of symbols should be avoided (ie. one crucifix or cross is enough within each area, one statue to the patron saint within the complex, etc.).

Balance also involves inclusion. Inclusion of cultures and the handicapped. Never deny the handicapped access by using their only access for seasonal decorations. Never leave out any culture in a multicultural community. Be inclusive in the committee and in the committee's plans to enhance the community's space.

QUALITY

Art serves the liturgy. Art (floral, fabric, or any other form) is real, creative, an expression of an artist that suggests mystery. Therefore, art should be of quality material. Artificial material has a difficult time supporting this ideal. Any display that can be found at Lazarus or the local discount store is not art that will support liturgy but is at best popular art. Folk art is fine for craft shows and receptions, but it does not suggest a sense of mystery for the liturgy. Art, in all its forms, should draw us beyond itself, and suggest the divine.

SEASONAL

Advent/Christmas

Christmas is one of the easiest feasts to “decorate” and it is one of the easiest to overdo. While our sacred space should be lush, it should not distract from the central focus of the altar, ambo or the presider’s chair. Chasing or flashing lights, popular as they may be, are distracting in our worship environment.

The creche is not a dominant focus, and belongs in a shrine or devotional area of the church. Placing the creche either beneath the altar or in front of it comes from an misunderstanding of how the Pope celebrated mass on Christmas day at the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore (Mary Major) in Rome. The altar at the basilica is directly over a small chapel in the basement which houses relics of the manger. Access to this chapel is down a flight of steps in front of the altar. By elevating the creche to the same level as the altar (either in front or under the altar) makes it a primary image and lessens the focus of the altar, which is one of our primary focuses at the celebration of the Eucharist. We should be just as cautious with the placement of the Advent wreath.

Lent/Easter

While the theme of Lent can be maintained throughout the forty days of the season, the same cannot be said about the fifty days of Easter. Like Lent, the Easter is not just several Sundays grouped together, they are the celebration of Easter, the “Great Sunday.” What we do throughout this period of time (music, art, floral, prayers, gestures, etc.) should have the same enthusiasm and spirit as the First Sunday of Easter.

What we do during this “Great Sunday” should never be out done by what we do during the Christmas season or any other time throughout the year.

Ordinary Time:

Hanging green banners after Pentecost and waiting until they turn brown with the leaves does not do justice to the uniqueness of the Sundays in Ordinary Time. While the season should be viewed as a whole there is nothing ordinary about Ordinary Time. Each of the unique Sundays should be studied and reviewed. The uniqueness of each Sunday should be used to modify the environment and highlight the uniqueness of that Sunday.

GLOSSARY

- Altar** The altar is the common table of the community and a symbol of Christ. It is holy and sacred, the resting place for bread, wine and the Sacramentary. The altar is central to the Eucharistic celebration. It should be approachable from every side and not hidden by floral arrangements or altar cloths.
- Ambry** The ambry is a cabinet or recess in the church wall that holds the sacred vessels of oil. The ambry is near the font for convenience and to show oil as a primary symbol of initiation. The beauty of the ambry and the vessels should remind the community of their own baptismal journey.
- Ambo** The ambo is a desk for reading and preaching. It should be reserved for these functions.
- Banners/Hangings** Fabric art should function as signs pointing to the spiritual reality and not fix attention on itself. Great care is needed in placing banners and other fabric art in the church so that people will not be distracted from the liturgical focal points and

action.

Candles	It is preferable that candles be floor-standing. Their number may be varied according to the season or celebration. They should be visible without impeding the action of the liturgy or the view of the altar, ambo, and presider's chair.
Censer/Brazier	The censer and/or brazier should be cleaned and maintained with regular care. The brazier is used to provide a stationary source of incense. It belongs on a small table or stand, not on the altar.
Crucifix	The cross is a basic symbol in any Christian celebration. There should be only be one in the liturgical area.
Doors	Doors are functional – they keep the heat in or out (if the space is air conditioned). However, in the church, they are portals to a holy place. Doors should be distinguished, free from posters and advertisements. They should be inviting, encouraging movement through them to the holy actions within.
Easter Candle	The Easter candle and its stand should be of special dimension and design to distinguish it as the “candle of candles.” During the Easter season it is to occupy a special place in the sanctuary. Thereafter the candle is to be placed near the baptismal font.
Flags	National flags (U.S. or Vatican) have no place in the sanctuary. They are better displayed in the gathering space.
Floral art	Flowers are symbolic of our joy in Christ and expressive of our thanksgiving for the gifts of creation. Their presence in the liturgical environment announces a spirit of celebration and the beauty of nature. The Church has long maintained their use. Whenever possible, flowers, plants, and trees are to be genuine. Their placement should never impede the approach to the altar or the flow of the liturgical action. Nor should they hide the ambo, altar or presider's chair.
Font	The font should always be kept fresh and clean if it is to be a source of new life and a reminder of baptism. Plants kept near the font can be a sign of life. If possible the font should serve as the place where all who enter may recall their baptism, replacing other holy water fonts throughout the church.
Gathering Space Vestibule	The vestibule or foyer provides a transitional space of welcome. It should be uncluttered, inviting, and a space that begins to prepare and invite the community to act in a ritual manner.
Incense	The use of incense in the liturgy is a symbol of the Church's offering and prayer going up to God. Incense should be a pleasing fragrance.
Linens	Linens should be of the finest quality a community can provide. They should be well crafted and of simple design. The care and maintenance of these linens is important. Soiled linens should regularly be washed; worn and frayed linens should be replaced. Linens are disposed of by burning or burying them.
Liturgical Books	Any book used by a presiding minister should be large, of good quality, and well designed - it should be visually attractive and impressive.

Nave, the community's space	The area for the community should be uncluttered with few distractions. Active participation suggest movement. The community should be free to turn toward one another and to be attentive to the liturgical action. A working sound system is also important.
Presider's Chair	The chair for the presider should be arranged that it is clearly seen as part of the one community. At the same time it should be conveniently located for the exercise of the presiding role.
Sanctuary	The presbyterium, the place proper to the presider during the Eucharist is to be visible to everyone in the gathered community – especially the altar. There should be nothing hiding the altar; floral arrangements, altar cloths, or other decorations. Free access to the altar for ministers is important, and must be maintained.
Stations of the Cross	Stations of the cross hanging on the walls of the worship space wrap the faithful in the passion death and resurrection of Christ – our story at every liturgy. Placed around the parameter of the church, they provide some distance for walking during times of devotional prayer.
Tabernacle	The tabernacle is a container for reserving communion for the sick. It also holds the consecrated eucharistic bread before which persons might pray devotional prayers to our Lord. During the celebration of the eucharist the tabernacle has no function – enough bread (host) should be consecrated for all participants at the particular celebration.
Vessels	Vessels used for the celebration of the Eucharist require special attention. They should be of good quality and design so as to reflect the importance of the ritual action. While communion under both forms is highly recommended, multiple cups and plates should not be on the altar until the fraction rite.
Vesture	Vestments are symbols of service and contribute to the celebration of the rite. They should have a simple dignity – well designed and made, impressive in their color and form.
Works of Art	Works of art should draw the community beyond the art itself. It is to provide a pathway to the divine. It should not compete with the ambo, altar or the presider's chair. If these items are commissioned art, they should support their function and focus.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Built of Living Stones - Art, Architecture and Worship*, Washington D.C.:USCC, 2000.

Burns, William, Publisher, *Ministry & Liturgy*, (a monthly subscription) San Jose, Ca: Resource Publication, Inc.,

Chinn, Nancy, *Spaces for Spirit - Adorning the Church*, Chicago: LTP, 1989.

Philippart, David, ed. *E & A* (Environment and Art Letter, A forum on architecture and the arts for the parish - a monthly subscription) Chicago: LTP.

CONCLUSION

This handbook has been prepared by the Office of Liturgy to assist you who are called to liturgical ministry. It defines your responsibilities according to the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (2nd.edition - 1975) the current directives of the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy.

Consultation and study of the *Institutio Generalis Romani 2000* is in progress. the actual text of the new Roman General Instruction cannot be changed, however, emendations can be made for its application in the United States. While the NCCB Committee on the Liturgy continues its work, Bishop Griffin has directed that no changes be made to current liturgical practice within our diocese (protocol #09/00).

We are committed to supporting you in this ministry and in your desire to grow in your understanding of the liturgy you serve. It is our hope that this handbook will be the beginning of a dialogue between liturgical ministers that encourages us to reflect upon why we do what we do and how to enter into "full, active, conscious" participation in the liturgy through the ministry to which we have been called.

If you have questions, comments, or ideas to add to the revision of this handbook, please direct them to:

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Peace and all good!

REFLECTION.

Lord, God of all creation,
Your Son, Jesus, sent His disciples ahead of Him
to prepare all things for the Passover Meal,
for the event of His Last Supper.
Like them, we have been given the honor
of preparing this special place.

May our concern
for the prayerfulness of these surroundings,
be our prayerful preparation for the community's worship.
May we not approach this holy service as a mere task
but see it in the opportunity to serve You
as well as the parish community.

May the work we are about to perform,
heighten our participation in your mysteries
make us more aware of your glory
and stimulate the whole community
in the celebrations for which we prepare.
May this work be a source of glory and honor to you.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ,
who lives with You and the Spirit, forever and ever.

Amen!