



The Catholic Archdiocese of  
Canberra and Goulburn

# Ministries of Liturgical Art and the Environment

Ministries of the Visual Arts and the Environment in Liturgy include: candle-makers and painters; banner, vestments, altar cloth and altar frontal makers; flower-arrangers; liturgy-focus creators; religious painters; stained glass makers and other artists.

Their names are recorded in the Book of Exodus, and the specific roles they executed are listed. It is also recorded that they passed on their talents to others, so that the work of preparation would not always fall to the same group.

## Background

Throughout the ages, people have created special places where they could carry out rituals and other activities that had special meaning for their tribe or culture. Sometimes there were different spaces for women and men. In these special areas, rites of passage were performed, initiation rites were practised or purification ceremonies (whereby persons were cleansed after some activity or period of confinement) occurred. These spaces assumed a special significance in the life of the community, and were surrounded with restrictions and taboos as to their use and access.

The Garden of Eden was the first sacred space. Here, God met with human beings and spoke with them. After the Hebrews exodus from Egypt, there are very precise descriptions of the early sacred space for Yahweh: the Tent of Dwelling. Size, materials and shape of the structure, colours and decorations were outlined. Every time the community moved, one of the first tasks in the new camp was to set up the Tent. This place was the focal point in times of need or decision-making. To this place, people brought their problems, uncertainties and conflicts.

The people who were involved with the preparation of this space were accorded a special place in the community.

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In the beginning of the Christian Church, there was the community. There were no churches, basilicas or cathedrals. The people met in Christian homes and an important presence of Christ was experienced when the Body of Christ, the baptised, gathered to celebrate liturgy.

As Christians grew in number, and particularly after Constantine (313 CE), larger buildings became necessary for gathering. Parish or town churches, basilicas, monasteries and cathedrals evolved. An example is the Roman Christian basilicas which were adapted from the design for the law courts. A basilica featured a long central section, with high windows, and one rounded end, with or without transepts (like the cross-bar on a cross). It could accommodate large crowds and could be lavishly decorated but its size discouraged preaching.

Every building has a plan and purpose. Each “says” something about the church’s understanding of itself (e.g. the relationship between people and those in ministry) and its relationship with God (e.g. the people’s closeness to or distance from the sanctuary).

## Church Architecture

Over the last century or so, although new building materials were available, traditional materials were the norm: stone, wood, brick, clear glass. Engineering progress offered more variety of construction. As greater participation of lay faithful in liturgy was sought, the nave (central body of the church) became wider and shorter, symbolising the gathering of the People of God around Christ, their head. To an extent, “form followed function”: church space aimed to allow for the variety of needs in the sacramental and devotional life of the people.

Vatican II reforms extended such thinking. In response to the need for lay ministers to proclaim the Word, and as access to the altar table (as eucharist regained its meal emphasis, alongside that of sacrifice) became important, the sanctuary space was opened up. Aisles were needed for processing; and the necessity for a central space for groups (e.g. RCIA candidates) to be seen, heard and prayed for emerged. In contemporary liturgy, a suitable and reasonably substantial gathering space is desirable, and ideal is a baptismal pool with moving water, located near the entrance to the building. Many churches were built in fan or semicircular shapes.

Flexible seating, good acoustics (preferably no carpet), clear sight of the main focuses of most liturgy (the priest’s chair, the ambo from where the scriptures are proclaimed, and the altar) are vital, to encourage the “full, conscious and active participation” by the faithful in the liturgy. Sacraments involve action. The Eucharist particularly is an action by all those present; it is a communal event involving dialogue: call (a reading or prayer) and response. A good liturgical space enables liturgical action. A church building is a visible expression of the faith community. It is a sign of the community’s joint faith, hope and common commitment.

## Liturgical Art

Inside the church, objects and furnishings are to be beautiful and simple. Beautiful to remind the faithful of God. Simple, showing a rejection of consumerism and the merely decorative, and so, modelling a way of being poor before God. They also need to be without clutter, so that the faithful may concentrate on the presence of Christ: in the people, in the Scriptures, in the transformed bread and wine and in the person of the priest.

The purpose of liturgical art is to reveal the ongoing faithfulness of God. The goal is not to “decorate” churches but to provide opportunities for the people to experience God’s consolation or encouragement, or to joyfully meet their God. By linking with ordinary life experience, sacred

art calls for engagement or participation by the faithful. Art shapes the imagination and hopefully leads towards an encounter with God, in reflection or meditation. Some art may challenge the community’s beliefs or assumptions, or at times suggest possibilities that have not been spoken of.

Good liturgical art is:

- inspired by Christ’s (or his saints’) saving action;
- firmly based in Catholic/Christian tradition yet contemporary in expression;
- sacred (i.e. it leads us to God);
- meeting a need of the community (temporary, seasonal or permanent);
- authentic in form (material, shape, texture, colour, line...); and
- supportive of the liturgical action (the sacramental life of the community).

## Some theological considerations:

- Though God is mystery, words and art forms are representations of God, and great care needs to be taken in their presentation in liturgy. The arts are focused on the infinite beauty of God and so are dedicated to giving glory and praise to God. They centre on turning the human spirit towards God.
- Liturgical celebrations need to involve the whole person: body, mind, the five senses, imagination, emotions, memory. While the environment must be beautiful to look at, its primary purpose is not merely visual. Creativity and imagination assist in shaping a setting where the senses all work together to *fully engage worshippers in the central events of the liturgy*.
- Arranging a good environment for worship calls for an awareness of the liturgy of this *particular time and place* (e.g. is it an Easter Vigil Mass or one on a weekday? Is it the funeral for a child or a great grandparent?)
- Each celebration should take place in a space carefully prepared by someone who takes seriously the importance of the relationship between the *faith and actions* of a worshipping assembly and *the appearance of the place* where they pray.
- Symbols are most important in liturgy, and the most important liturgical symbol is the assembly of believers. Its most powerful expression occurs when the community gathers together on Sundays.
- Because liturgy is both an individual and communal experience, it flourishes best in a hospitable climate, where people are comfortable with and can see each other, and are involved as participants. The environment needs to be inviting, uplifting and warm.

- This very hospitality lives in tension with another aspect of liturgy: its mystery, its consciousness of God. Sometimes symbols or artistic expression (e.g. actions, lighting, décor, banners, paintings, liturgical movement, placement of symbols, processions... ) can help us be more aware of the sacred, and so will encourage joy and prayerfulness.
- Art forms serve the liturgy. They must never interrupt, replace or stop the liturgical flow.

### Some practical considerations:

- The environment and its arrangement serve the liturgy. Preparing the environment is much more than arranging flowers and hanging banners. It is a work of arranging objects, furnishings, movements, sights, sounds, colours, aromas, tastes and textures in such a way that the community can gather for prayer, hear and reflect on God's Word in the Scriptures and participate fully in the ritual action.
- Church architecture is shaped by the faith of the people. Modern churches have been influenced by the renewed understanding of the liturgy from Vatican II: liturgical space is there to serve the renewed liturgy. Christ is in the midst of his people.
- The space needs to create a sense that what is seen is close, important and personal. It needs a sense of hospitality and graciousness and ideally conveys unity and integrity.
- Consideration should be given to the requirements of the whole community, i.e. including those with disabilities and particular needs.
- The space needs to accommodate sitting, standing and kneeling and to allow for movement such as procession and liturgical movement. Broad and full visual and tactile gestures support the ritual and enhance assembly unity.
- The gathering space (e.g. vestibule) can be used for a variety of purposes, e.g. introductions, conversations, refreshments.
- The church's design, integrity, beauty, simplicity and landscaping need to be sensitive to the local area, for example with regard to choice and colour of building materials, choice of furniture and sacred vessels, shrub and tree species.
- "Spectators" are not allowed in liturgy: all need to be involved in the action.
- Creation and maintenance of suitable symbols, banners, candles, altar frontals (etc) can help to engage the whole person in the liturgy, by focusing energy and attention.
- Furnishings, art forms and symbols, movements and postures have a tremendous impact on the assembly visually, environmentally and bodily. For example, with regard to symbols:
  - an ambo of substantial size, made of the same material as the altar;
  - a suitable crib in the Christmas season, perhaps linking it with the cross;
  - Communion processions which begin from the back have the effect of enveloping the assembly in ritual movement;
  - standing and singing to greet the Gospel, and making three signs of honour on the forehead, lips and heart, testify to the power of this reading.
- Visibility, audibility and comfort for all are essential:
  - pews/chairs need to be arranged for comfort and participation;
  - ventilation, heating and lighting are to be properly adjusted;
  - draughts need to be eliminated;
  - objects and paper not related to the current occasion need to be removed;
  - remove the cause of any unpleasant smells;
  - musical instruments need to be tuned;
  - music, microphones and audio-visual equipment are to be ready to function without further adjustment.
- Chair, ambo (lectern) and altar should be placed so that all can see and hear the person reading / presiding, and to allow for ease of movement in ritual action.
- Focus on the primary sacramental symbols (e.g. bread and wine, oil, water for Eucharist and Baptism) is important, so a custom of more austere interiors, with fewer objects on walls or in corners, has developed.
- Check the theme of the day's worship against the features in the liturgical space. It may be necessary to remove one or more items (e.g. extra candles) and add something of quality or beauty (e.g. an appropriate banner). Generally, keep the area simple and avoid clutter. One effective symbol is more powerful than many conflicting images.

- Church furniture and objects (such as vessels for the bread and wine, books, images and decorations) should be suitable for their purpose and capable of making a visual or other sensory contribution to the beauty of the liturgy (e.g. via beautiful wood, hand-crafted work).
- Flower arrangements need to be appropriate for the circumstance and the church design.
- Lighting can be used creatively to add atmosphere.
- The ritual spaces should be dignified, graceful and uncluttered. When the focus is the altar, it would not be appropriate to have an “over the top” arrangement of flowers, fabrics, candles or other items in front of or on the altar. Keep the altar utterly simple, not as a receptacle for notes, or even flowers. Candlesticks may be placed either on or around the altar in a way suited to the altar’s design.

These important considerations of the liturgical space and art serve to promote better opportunities for worship and full participation in the liturgy.

## For further reading:

*And When Churches Are To Be Built: Preparation, Planning and Construction of Places of Worship*, Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 2015.

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*The General Instruction of the Roman Missal: Final Text with Application for Australia* (2012), St Pauls Publications.

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