

Insights In Liturgy

Evaluating Worship's Environment

By FATHER JAMES M. SAUERS

In dealing with the challenges and problems of liturgical planning there is always the temptation to become detached from the actual environment within which we are gathering together to celebrate the mysteries of our faith. Environment is an essential ingredient in the planning and the actual celebration.

Before we can decide on how we are going to celebrate this or that particular event, we must be "in touch" with the place of the celebration. How many times has the liturgy committee looked at the space in our churches? Have you observed the space with a congregation present, and without? Have you sat in different sections of the Church to evaluate visual contact, acoustics, feelings? It might be a good idea to ask the members of the committee to discuss what they have seen, heard and felt at the "average" celebrations. Then take a look at the hopes and expectations that you have for the future.

Even though you find yourself hoping for a new church - one that is more conducive to the renewed liturgy - unfortunately present day costs prevent new construction in most parishes. But liturgy can be enriched through some simple observations and changes if we are sensitive to the environment and the people who are a part of that environment. Then we will celebrate sensitive liturgies.

The next time you meet as a committee or sub-committee, consider these topics as you begin planning.

Ministers: Are the various ministers for this liturgy involved in the planning? Is their presence

and participation natural or do they seem to be added artificially to the service? Are the ministers moving slowly and gracefully? Do their gestures invite the congregation to be a part of the celebration?

Space: What do you see when you view your liturgical space? Is everything in the sanctuary necessary for this particular celebration? What can be removed? Do we use lighting effectively to emphasize certain areas and symbols or to de-emphasize others? Does the sacramental action in this celebration flow gracefully without interruption and frustrations?

Flowers: Do we have too many flowers in the church? Do we go "all out" for flowers at Christmas and Easter and leave the rest of the year to funeral and wedding flowers? Are the flowers obstructing the view of what is happening at the altar? Could we use green plants as a sign of life in the Baptistry or Sanctuary area? Is it possible to have flowers in other parts of the church (vestibule, aisles, table with the offertory gifts)? Remember Christ is present in the midst of the community and not just in the sanctuary. The church is people gathered together in prayer. The sanctuary is not a stage but space around which the community gathers to share their lives in the life of Christ and His Church.

Candles: Do the candles we use in church present us with the symbol of Christ as our light, as well as the symbol of our lives being spent in service and, therefore, sharing that light? Metal "tube" candles prevent wax from dripping on the altar, but in the process they destroy any symbolic value. If efficiency is your concern you might find another committee to work with. Otherwise, we might be filling our church with "computer people" who don't move, don't sneeze, cough or cry and do respond perfectly. We say

a great deal about our feelings and attitudes toward the church by what we say and do in our liturgies.

Banners/Tapestries: Is your church made for banners or tapestries? Are they visible to everyone in Church? Are they all words and pictures (banners) or are they artistically designed fabric and colors (tapestries)? Does it draw our attention beyond itself to God or are we lost in marveling at the words, colors and shapes?

Vessels: Do we use real bread? Do we use red wine (it is more easily visible and more appealing to look at than most of our white wines)? Do we clutter our altars with chalices of different shapes and sizes when we have communion under both forms? It would be better to use a single cup and wine decanter for the celebration and bring the other cups to the table to be filled during the sign of peace. Are the vessels simple in design, yet dignified?

Vestments: "The beauty of a vestment should derive from its material and form rather than from its ornamentation. Ornamentation should include only symbols, images or pictures suitable for liturgical use, and anything unbecoming should be avoided." (Sacramentary, General Instructions, #306). Some of the vestments that are used today are overly decorated or filled with words and pictures that tell everyone who the person is, where he is from and how he feels (Alleluia!). Yet the fabric and color of the vestment should say it all.

Vestments that were made for pre-Vatican II liturgy, although they may be beautiful material, were made to be seen from the back, when the priest faced the wall. Therefore, pictures or symbols were on the priests' back to aid in congregational devotion. To wear such vestments today, however, is ridiculous. The vestment is viewed from the front. It should be simple and graceful. The material from old vestments may be

given to an artist to be used in the creation of new stoles or tapestries for a celebration.

Do you have a set of stoles for concelebration? New stoles and vestments can be made on the local level by a seamstress and or artist in the parish and the cost does not have to be overwhelming. What are the vestments in your church like? Do they enhance the celebration?

Media: If recorded music, films, slides are used in the celebration it should not be seen as an interruption in the service. Is your church made for various media experiences? Will the use of media cause the celebration to be broken into a different path?

Liturgical Dance/Drama: If dance or drama are incorporated in the liturgy, are they being used for the right reasons? Is it a novel experience? Has the congregation become part of the experience or are they merely spectators? Is the dance drama done with grace and reverence?

Obviously this check list could go on at much greater length. The principle of using the environment to serve the prayer and worship of the congregation remains unchanged.

We must continually evaluate what is being done in our liturgies. Evaluation should be done soon after the service. Keep a record of what was done, who was involved and how it flowed. Then mistakes and successes won't be repeated over and over again.

Perfection is not to be sought after - we cannot be perfect. Yet with our imperfection we must be sensitive to the Church and the mysteries which we celebrate - in the name of Jesus Christ.

As liturgists we are called to be doers and dreamers never totally satisfied - always searching for a better way to celebrate the love which Christ has for His struggling, imperfect Church.

Giving Thanks

"Through Sharing We Give Thanks" is the theme of a special Thanksgiving Eve Mass being planned at St. Philip Neri Church, 1782 Clifford. Father Charles Connell, pastor, and his associate, Father Paul Schnacky, will begin the

celebration at 7 p.m. Nov. 22. Non-perishable foods given by members of the congregation will be brought to the altar, and later put away in the Parish Pantry for the use of needy families throughout the year.



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Brooklyn Priests Rejoin Federation

The Brooklyn Senate of Priests, which withdrew last April from the National Federation of Priests Councils, has voted to return to the organization. Father James Ratigan, federation president, welcoming back the Brooklyn Senate, said it had "played a very important part in the history of NFPC from its inception."

He noted that the 1979 House of Delegates Convocation in Boston would be discussing "priests' councils' response to the call to evangelization" and said the federated councils were looking forward to Brooklyn's contribution, "because of its position as a uniquely urban diocese."

Youth Group

Mt. Morris - The Youth Group at St. Patrick's meets in the Youth Center every Thursday, and welcomes high school students to take part in varied activities. Anyone who would like to join, or to chaperone some future expedition is asked to call Tim Reynolds at 658-3559. During the Summer and Fall, the group has had trips to Letchworth Park, Roseland and Toronto, a hayride, disco lessons and a dance.

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