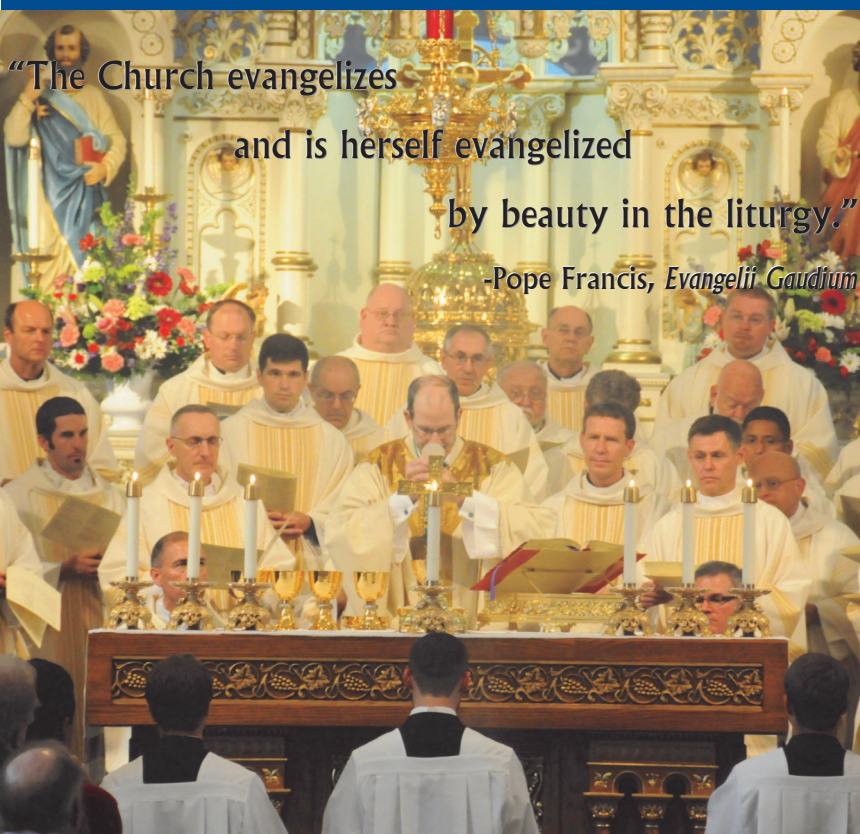


A Simple Guide to Liturgical Environment Preparing a Space for Worship



A Resource of the
Office of Worship
Diocese of New Ulm

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"This world in which we live needs beauty in order not to sink into despair.

*Beauty, like truth, brings joy to the human heart,
and is that precious fruit which resists the erosion of time,
which unites generations and enables them to be one in admiration.*

*And all this through the work of your hands...
Remember that you are the custodians of beauty in the world."*

—Pope Paul VI

"Address to Artists upon the Closing of the Second Vatican Council," 8 December 1965

General Church Layout

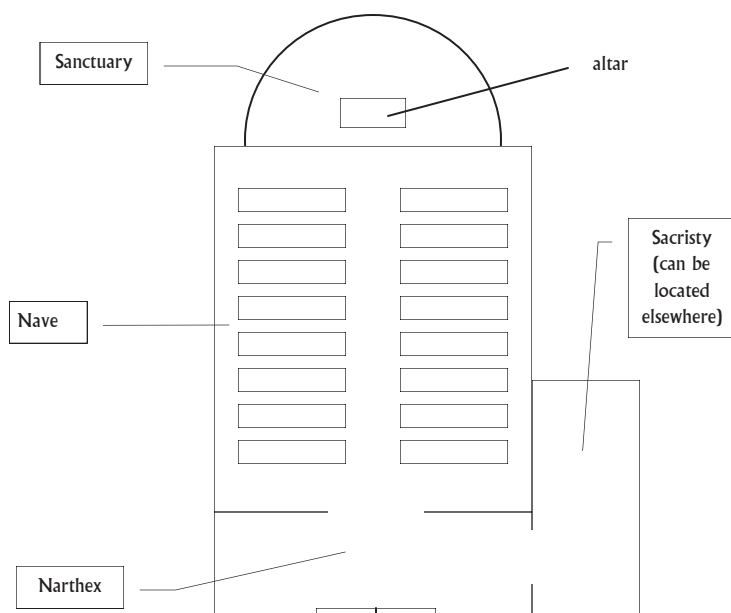
The church is a place for the People of God to come together to offer worship to God and to receive his grace in the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. When we enter a church, we should immediately sense that it is “different” than other places, that it is sacred, a place for prayer, where our whole being is oriented to God. “Indeed, the nature and beauty of the place and all its furnishings should foster devotion and express visually the holiness of the mysteries celebrated there” (GIRM 294).

While the whole church is a space set apart from ordinary life, different places in the church have different functions and levels of sacredness. These different areas (the narthex, nave, sanctuary, and sacristy) are explained on the following page.



General Church Layout

- **Narthex:** This is the area generally directly inside the main doors of the church, before one enters the main body of the church. It is a transitional space—from secular to sacred—where we might post announcements, have an area to sit or greet one another, etc., before entering the more sacred space inside.
- **Nave:** The nave is the main body of the church where the congregation sits. It often contains statues or shrines for private prayer, Stations of the Cross, and a place for baptisms.
- **Sanctuary:** The sanctuary is the most sacred place in the church, often raised by one or three steps, where the altar, ambo, presider's chair, and tabernacle are placed. It should be a visible reflection of heaven and the heavenly liturgy; it should be the most beautiful space in the church, where our eyes are attracted.
- **Sacristy:** This is the room where the priest gets ready and preparations are made for Mass. It should always be kept clean and free of clutter; it should also have a crucifix and other images.



Layout of the Narthex

The Catechism explains, “When we enter the house of God, we must cross a *threshold*, which symbolizes passing from the world wounded by sin to the world of the new Life to which all men are called” (CCC 1186). The **narthex** represents this threshold. It is a transitional space where we mentally prepare to leave behind all the cares and strain of ordinary life in order to be refreshed and filled with God’s life.

Below are some general principles for decorating the narthex:

- The narthex is where we welcome people into the church; it should be **inviting** and well-kept, never dingy, shabby, or cluttered. It could also contain information on the ministries of the parish (becoming a member, catechetical and evangelistic initiatives, youth ministry, etc.)
- The narthex is the place for **informational displays**, bulletin boards, etc., which do not directly relate to prayer or sacred worship (for example, church information, fundraisers, schedules, posters, displays of those in the armed forces, etc.) It takes diligent upkeep to ensure that this space does not become cluttered, especially with outdated information!
- The narthex is also a good place for **flags** (such as the American flag), or banners which designate service organizations (such as the CCW or the Knights of Columbus).
- It is also important that the narthex have its own simple beauty which already begins to orient our hearts toward God. For example, it should contain **sacred art**, such as statues or paintings of Jesus, Mary, angels, or saints. It could also contain green plants or flowers. It should not be as elaborate as the sanctuary, but it should not feel merely like a hotel lobby or a cozy living room.

Layout of the Nave

The primary purpose of the **nave** is a place for the faithful to pray and to actively participate in the Mass. Therefore, it must be set up in a way that facilitates the needs of the liturgy: pews or chairs with kneelers, aisles for the flow of the communion procession, etc. It should also be a place that “invites us to the recollection and silent prayer that extend and internalize the great prayer of the Eucharist” (CCC 1185).

Below are some general principles for decorating the nave:

- The nave should have a “**noble simplicity**” that is entirely free of clutter and distraction. Anything that would distract from prayer and devotion (for example, a fundraising poster or a VBS advertisement) should be placed in the narthex, not the nave.
- Fonts or bowls for **holy water** should be stationed at each entrance to the nave. They should always be kept clean and filled.
- The nave often has beautiful **sacred art** or images which foster devotion and the contemplation of heavenly things. For example:
 - Shrines to Mary, Joseph, or other saints on either side of the sanctuary, or in alcoves located throughout the nave.
 - If these shrines were erected in such a way that they have an altar in front of them, this “altar” should not be decorated “in any special way” so as not to cause confusion with the main altar of sacrifice (unless they are located in a full side chapel where Mass or Eucharistic exposition occurs) (see GIRM 303).
 - The use of votive candles at these shrines has a long tradition and is noteworthy, as long as the area is clean and dignified. The use of electric “candles” is not appropriate, lacking necessary dignity.
 - The Stations of the Cross should be erected and stationed throughout the nave for the public or private practice of this devotion.
- It is not forbidden to put the **American flag** or similar symbols in the nave. However, if flags seem out of harmony with the devotional environment, they may be placed in the narthex instead.

Layout of the Sanctuary

The word **sanctuary** means “a holy place.” Of all the places in the church, it must be decorated with the greatest dignity and beauty, which corresponds to its significance for our faith. Traditional décor in the sanctuary reflects the heavenly liturgy—depicting angels and saints, the garden of paradise, the holy city, etc.—and uses the finest of materials, such as gold and marble.

Below are some general principles for decorating the sanctuary:

- The **altar** is in the center of the sanctuary, the clear focal point.
- If the **tabernacle** is in the main church, it is most appropriately located in the sanctuary, in a noble, prominent, conspicuous, beautiful place (preferably in the center, making it easily seen by all) (see GIRM 314—315).
- The **presider’s chair** should not be located in front of the tabernacle. If the tabernacle is not in the center, the presider’s chair could be in the center behind the altar (see GIRM 310).
- There must be a **crucifix** clearly visible to the whole congregation somewhere in the sanctuary. The crucifix must display the body of Christ crucified; it may not be a blank cross or an image of the resurrected Christ (GIRM 308).
- It is appropriate to have **statues** or **images** of the Trinity, Mary, saints, and angels in the sanctuary, as they remind us of the heavenly liturgy. However, be judicious about the number and arrangement of images so that they do not become a distraction. Do not have more than one image of the same saint in the sanctuary (see GIRM 318).
- **Flowers** are important, reminding us of the beauty of paradise. They are appropriate in every season but Lent. They should be moderate during Advent and more elaborate during the higher feasts. Artificial flowers should not be used. A man would never bring his wife fake flowers; neither should we offer them to God!

The Altar

As stated earlier, the altar should be centered in the sanctuary, the clear focal point where everyone's attention is naturally drawn (GIRM 299). Decorations should be simple and beautiful.

What goes on the altar:

- A **white altar cloth**, the shape of which is fitted for the altar (so that it doesn't look sloppy or awkward). Generally the altar cloth is made of linen or other fine fabric and may have lace decorated with Christian symbols.
- A **frontal** or **antependium**, which is a decorative cloth of the seasonal liturgical color. This is optional, and must always be placed *under* the proper altar cloth, which *must* be white (GIRM 117 and 304).
- **Candles** customarily made of white wax. At least two candles are required for any Mass, but four or six are very appropriate for Sunday Mass and high solemnities. If the bishop is saying the Mass (as at confirmation), it is customary to use seven candles, the seventh going in the center (see GIRM 117 and 307). For Eucharistic exposition, use at least four candles.
- A **crucifix**. Every sanctuary should have a large crucifix that is clearly visible to all the people (see pg. 7). In addition, it is customary to have a smaller crucifix on the altar that faces the priest.

What does not go on the altar:

- Flowers. They can and should be placed around the altar, as long as this does not obscure the design of the altar, but not on top of it (GIRM 304).
- Anything not needed for the priest (and deacon) to celebrate Mass. Even outside of Mass, the sacredness of the altar should be revered by never setting anything on it that does not befit its dignity (cleaning supplies, watering can, books, etc.)

The Tabernacle

The **tabernacle**, as the place where the Lord's body is kept, should be treated with utmost reverence and surrounded with beauty. Its location should be "truly noble, prominent, conspicuous, worthily decorated, and suitable for prayer" (GIRM 314). The tabernacle is one of the things that most clearly identifies a Catholic church, as Catholics are the only Christians to adore the reserved Eucharistic species outside of Mass. "The dignity, placing, and security of the Eucharistic tabernacle should foster adoration before the Lord really present in the Blessed Sacrament of the altar" (CCC 1183).

Set-up and decoration of tabernacle area (see GIRM 314—317):

- The **tabernacle** must be made of a solid, unbreakable material, such as metal or hard wood. It may not be made of glass or other transparent material. It must always be locked and the key should not be kept near it.
- The **tabernacle stand** should elevate the tabernacle enough to be clearly seen by anyone praying in the pews. The tabernacle should be affixed to the stand so that it could not be carried away. Some tabernacles are built into a "high altar" that forms the apex of the sanctuary; this is a legitimate arrangement and may be preserved for its artistic value (see GIRM 303, 315).
- A **sanctuary lamp** should always be burning near the tabernacle. Generally this lamp is a large candle placed in a clear or red glass holder. It may be hanging or on a stand, even the same stand that the tabernacle is on. There may be more than one lamp, such as one on either side of the tabernacle.
- It is sometimes customary to have a number (two, four, or six) of larger **candlesticks** near the tabernacle; however, all that is strictly needed is the sanctuary lamp.
- **Flowers** may also be placed near the tabernacle, in veneration of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

The Ambo and Presider's Chair

The **ambo**, sometimes called a *lectern*, is the special podium set apart for the proclamation of the Word of God during Mass and other liturgical celebrations.

- The ambo should be sturdy and stationary—not a moveable podium—but one fixed in a very visible location (GIRM 309).
- There may be a separate podium that the cantor uses to lead music for Mass, but the cantor should not use the ambo. It is strictly for the proclamation of the Word of God, the homily, and the General Intercessions.
- Flowers may be set near the ambo to highlight its significance, as well as an antependium of the liturgical color.

The **presider's chair** should be distinct from other chairs in the sanctuary, as the place for the main celebrant. It should be clear from the appearance and placement of the chair that the priest is “presiding over the gathering...and directing the prayer” (GIRM 310) in the person of Christ the Head (*in persona Christi capitis*) who is the true celebrant of the sacred liturgy (CCC 1348).

- The presider's chair should be larger and more decorative than other chairs in the sanctuary, but should also avoid “any appearance of a throne” (GIRM 310).
- The presider's chair should not be cluttered with hymnals, binders, notes from old homilies, etc. If needed, a stand may be placed near it to hold these items neatly, but the chair itself should be tidy, lending to the dignity of its symbolism.
- See page 7 for more information on the location of the presider's chair in the sanctuary.

Seasonal Environment: Ordinary Time

Liturgical Color for Ordinary Time: **Green**

Feast Days in Ordinary Time:

All Saints' Day: **white** and/or **gold***

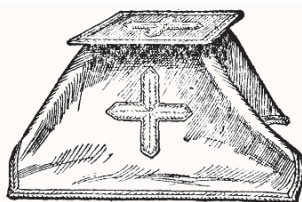
Christ the King: **white** and/or **gold***

Marian feasts: **white** (optional **blue** accents)

Feasts of Apostles: **red**

*Gold or silver vestments may always be used “on more solemn occasions” at the discretion of the pastor (see GIRM 346h).

- The priest's **chasuble** and **stole** must be green on Sundays of Ordinary Time. To accent the liturgical season, the main chalice for Mass could be covered with a green **chalice veil** and **burse** (a flat square envelope containing the corporal for Mass).



- Another way to highlight the liturgical color would be to use a green **antependium** or **frontal** for the altar and/or ambo, keeping in mind that the altar cloth must always be white.

Tips:

- Focus on liturgical themes/holidays rather than secular ones. For example, don't spend so much effort decorating for Thanksgiving that you neglect the Solemnity of Christ the King!
- Less is more. No need to multiply green banners and streamers. At the end of the day, the priest's vestment shows us the color.
- Always keep in mind that the sanctuary is a reflection of heaven. Because of this, beauty, loveliness, sacredness, and grandeur must always be the rule; anything lacking quality or evoking the secular must be avoided (for example: artificial plants, plastic pumpkins, blinking lights, low-quality artwork, etc.)

Seasonal Environment: Advent

Liturgical Color for Advent: **Violet (Purple)** and **Rose (Pink)**

Feast Days in Advent Season:

Immaculate Conception: **white** (optional **blue** accents)

- The priest's **chasuble** and **stole** must be violet on the first, second, and fourth Sunday of Advent. On the third Sunday (Gaudete Sunday), he may wear either rose or violet.
- Blue is not a legitimate vestment color during Advent.
- Decoration of the church during Advent should use the colors **violet** and **rose**; any semblance of Christmas colors should be avoided, and a Christmas tree should not be placed in the church before the season of Christmas.
- The **advent wreath** may be displayed in the narthex or in the sanctuary. It is customarily "constructed of a circle of ever-green branches into which are inserted four candles" (BB 1510), three violet and one rose.
- The advent wreath should be visible to the congregation, but "should not interfere with the celebration of the liturgy, nor should it obscure the altar, the lectern, or the chair" (BB 1512).
- The wreath should have real candles, not electric ones.
- **Flowers** are permitted during Advent, but only in moderation (GIRM 305). The character of Advent is one of waiting and expectation for the full joy of Christmas, and decoration should express this. Gaudete Sunday, however, is meant to convey an expectant joy, and more flowers could be used (without a resemblance to Christmas decorations).



Seasonal Environment: Christmas

Liturgical Color for Christmas: **White** and/or **Gold***

Feast Days in Christmas Season:

Holy Family: **white**

Epiphany: **white** and/or **gold***

Baptism of the Lord: **white**

*See note about gold vestments on pg. 11.

- A **Christmas crèche** may be placed either in the front of the nave in a visible place or in the sanctuary. It is best not to place it directly in front of the altar. It may even be set up in advance of Christmas (beginning Dec. 17, but often Dec. 24), but the baby Jesus should not be placed in the crib until the first Christmas Mass is celebrated (either the night before or on Christmas Day).
- **Flowers, candles, etc.**, should reflect the heavenly glory of the Incarnation: God coming to earth! Poinsettias are traditional but need not be used. Gold, red, green, and white are traditional Christmas colors. The atmosphere should be very festive.
- **Evergreen trees** (Christmas trees) also have a long tradition in Christmas decoration, but if such trees are used in the sanctuary, they should not obscure the altar, ambo, presider's chair, or tabernacle. They should not have blinking or flashing lights, or ornaments that are in any way cheap, secular, or distracting. Elegance, beauty, and glory are the keywords.



Seasonal Environment: Lent

Liturgical Color for Lent: **Violet (Purple)**

Feast Days in Lenten Season:

St. Joseph: **white**

Annunciation: **white** and/or **gold***

Laetare Sunday (fourth Sunday of Lent): **rose** (optional)

Passion/Palm Sunday: **red**

*See note about gold vestments on pg. 11.

- It is forbidden to use **flowers** during Lent (GIRM 305), except on Laetare Sunday (fourth Sunday of Lent) and on solemnities (such as the Annunciation). Any live plants should also be removed from the sanctuary and nave.
- It is appropriate to use **violet fabric** (or a frontal or antependium) under the altar cloth, near the ambo, etc., to give a sense of the season.
- It is not appropriate to remove the **holy water** from the holy water fonts during Lent. Lent is a time specifically to recall our baptism, and holy water is a special sign of baptism (UNLY 27).
- Beginning the fifth Sunday of Lent, the Church has a tradition of **covering sacred images** and crosses with violet cloth. If a parish chooses to follow this tradition, the images would be covered before Mass on that Sunday. Crosses in the church would be uncovered following the celebration of the Lord's Passion (Good Friday), but images (statues, etc.) would remain covered until the beginning of the Easter Vigil. Stations of the Cross should not be covered up.
- **Passion/Palm Sunday:** Red cloth may be used in place of the violet cloth to decorate the altar, ambo, crucifix, etc. Arrangements of palm branches may be placed in the sanctuary, but flowers should not be used. After Mass, the red cloth and palms should be removed from the sanctuary and the penitential violet color returned for the first three days of Holy Week.

Seasonal Environment: Holy Thursday

Liturgical Color for Holy Thursday: **White** and/or **Gold***

*See note about gold vestments on pg. 11.

- The season of Lent ends with the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Thursday evening; violet cloth used to decorate the altar, ambo, etc., should be removed before this Mass, and could be replaced with white (but if images are veiled they would remain so).
- The **altar of repose**, to which the Eucharist is transferred at the end of Mass, should be beautifully decorated with a white altar cloth, many candles, flowers, gold cloth, etc. At midnight, when the time of solemn adoration ends, the candles should be extinguished (except for one customary tabernacle lamp) and the flowers and other decorations taken away.
- All **crosses** are removed from the church or veiled with red or violet cloth following the Mass of the Lord's Supper.
- After the Mass of the Lord's Supper, the **altar** is stripped of the altar cloth, candles, and crucifix and left bare.
- **Holy water** is removed from holy water fonts immediately after the Mass of the Lord's Supper, as the altar is stripped.
- After the Mass of the Lord's Supper, **no candles** or lamps should be lit anywhere in the church, including at votive shrines (except for one lamp burning by the altar of repose).



Two beautiful examples of an altar of repose with white altar cloth, candles, flowers, and gold fabric.



Seasonal Environment: Good Friday

Liturgical Color for Good Friday: Red

- The character of this day is one of mourning and penance. The church environment is stark and bare; the **altar** is bare, without cloth or ornamentation; the **ambo** and other podiums should have no ornamentation. All **crosses** and **statues** are covered with violet or red cloth (portable crosses, such as the processional cross, can be removed from the church).
- The **crucifix for veneration** during the Celebration of the Lord's Passion should be "of appropriate size and beauty" (CLE 68), i.e. large enough for everyone to see and very beautiful.
 - Only **one cross** should be used for the veneration of the cross, even if this may take time (CLE 69, also see *Ordo*.) None of the parishes of our diocese are large enough to warrant the use of more than one cross for veneration.
 - The cross is traditionally covered with **violet cloth**, which is taken off as the celebrant chants the "Behold the wood of the cross."
 - After the veneration, the cross is placed in the center of the sanctuary in front of the altar, propped in such a way that it is visible to most people. This cross is the visual focal point of the celebration, and no other decoration in the church should detract attention from it.
 - Two or four lighted **candles** should remain burning near the cross, even after the Celebration of the Lord's Passion, all during the time that the faithful adore the cross.
- The **altar of repose** is not beautifully decorated as it was the day before. Rather, it is simply a tabernacle near an altar with a white cloth, an open corporal on the altar cloth, and one tabernacle lamp burning. It should also have two unlit processional candles which will be lit at the time of Holy Communion. It should have no other decoration.

Seasonal Environment: Easter Vigil

Liturgical Color for Easter Vigil: The Finest **White** and/or **Gold***

*See note about gold vestments on page 11.

- Of all the celebrations of the Church year, the Easter Vigil is the highest. Therefore, its **environment** should be the most lavish, as far as flowers (traditionally including white lilies), candles, gold fabric, etc. However, the highest solemnity, elegance, and beauty must be expressed: no toy bunnies, pastel eggs, etc.



- The **Easter candle** should be new every year, made of beeswax, and large enough “to signify that Christ is the light of the whole world” (CLE n. 82). The whole candle should be real, not a small real candle placed inside a large false (plastic, etc.) candle. The candlestick for the vigil should be placed in a prominent place in the sanctuary and surrounded with flowers, rich fabric, etc.

- The **Easter fire** (or the “New Fire”) is ideally a large bonfire *outside* of the church. However, a smaller indoor fire (such as a pan of alcohol mixed with salt) is sometimes used inside the entrance to the church. In any case, it should really be a fire, “whose flames should be such that they genuinely dispel the darkness and light up the night” (CLE 82).



- The **Easter water** blessed at the Easter vigil should preferably be in the baptismal font, even if there is no baptism at the vigil. However, if the church has no permanent font or it is not located conveniently, a noble vessel of water (such as a large bowl or jug) should be placed in a prominent place in the church. This water should then be used to fill all the holy water fonts throughout the Easter season.

Seasonal Environment: Easter Season

Liturgical Color for Easter Season: **White**

Liturgical Color for Pentecost: **Red**

- The Easter Season is the most joyful and festive season of the liturgical year. The gold fabric, flowers, etc., that decorated the sanctuary beginning with the Easter Vigil should remain for the entirety of the Easter Season (using additional red fabric on Pentecost).



- Once the **flowers** from the Easter Vigil are no longer in bloom, additional flowers should be added so that the sanctuary continues to have the festive joy of Easter for the entire fifty days.
- The **Easter candle** remains in its prominent place in the sanctuary for the entirety of the Easter Season.
- The **Easter water** blessed at the Easter Vigil should be used to fill the holy water fonts during the Easter Season. It is also used for the sprinkling rite during Masses on Easter Sunday.
- **First Communion** is often celebrated during the Easter Season. Below are a few notes on decoration for First Communion:

- The colors white and gold may be used in decoration. The image of the host and chalice, bread and wine, wheat, the Victorious Lamb, etc., are appropriately used in decoration.
- Décor for first communions must always be elegant, solemn, and beautiful. Surrounding the ceremony with noble beauty will help children to grasp the dignity and importance of the sacrament, rather than talking down to them with childish décor. If the children make their own decorations (such as felt banners) as mementoes, these should preferably be displayed in the nave or narthex, rather than in the sanctuary.

Resources

Below are resources quoted in this guide that will be helpful for you to read as you continue to grow in understanding liturgical environment. If you read anything, read the GIRM!

Book of Blessings (BB): This book contains many specific blessings along with Liturgy of the Word ceremonies used to bless buildings, devotional items, the Advent wreath, etc.

Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC): This text explains the beautiful theology behind the liturgy, and helps us apply this theology to practical matters. We recommend Chapter 2, Article 1, nn. 1066—1186, especially nn. 1179—1186.

General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM): This is the Church's official "guidebook" for how to arrange the church space, set up for Mass, and celebrate the Eucharist. We recommend you read Chapter V: "The Arrangement and Ornamentation of Churches." It can be purchased from usccbpublishing.org or read free online at www.usccb.org.

Circular Letter Concerning the Preparation and Celebration of the Easter Feasts (CLE): A document that gives specific regulations for the Triduum, going into greater detail than the GIRM.

Universal Norms on the Liturgical Year (UNLY): This document is generally found as a companion to the GIRM, often printed in the same volume directly after the GIRM. It gives basic principles regarding the celebrations of the Church year.

Additional Resources:

Ceremonies of the Liturgical Year, Archbishop Peter J. Elliott, Ignatius Press (San Francisco: 2002).

Ceremonies of the Modern Roman Rite, Revised Edition, Archbishop Peter J. Elliott, Ignatius Press (San Francisco: 2005).

*These two books, while extremely helpful, do not account for some of the recent revisions in the GIRM, and should be cross-referenced with it.

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