

Collegeville Ministry Series

THE MINISTRY OF LITURGICAL ENVIRONMENT

Revised Edition

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LITURGICAL PRESS
Collegeville, Minnesota

www.litpress.org

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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Library of Congress Control Number: 2015947046

ISBN: 978-0-8146-4871-1 978-0-8146-4896-4 (ebook)

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Introduction

Fifty and ten: nice, even, and significant numbers. Fifty: the years since *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy) was promulgated.¹ Well, that was on December 4, 1963, so it's actually been a few years more than fifty. Ten: the years since the first edition of this book on the ministry of liturgical environment came out. Well, that was in 2004, so it's actually been a bit beyond the ten years. Since the early twenty-first century, no official, new documents have come out from either the Vatican or the US bishops concerning the environment.

Well, then, why a revision of this ministry book? While the principles and directives on liturgical environment are not new, what is new is our understanding of them, our practice of them, our engagement with them. Since liturgical communities are ever growing and changing (or at least they ought to be), it makes sense that the environment in which they worship will also grow and change. And it has. This is reflected not only in the revised content of these seven chapters but also in the new order in which the chapters appear. In this revised edition of *The Ministry of Liturgical Environment*, the content of the chapters moves from people (first two chapters) to space (next three chapters) to action (last two chapters). This alerts us to something of a liturgical priority when it comes to the environment of the sacred space.

People are our most important “commodity.” In fact, in many ways the people in church—the gathered assembly, the church

made visible—is the environment. Why and how the people are there, the deportment and even dress of the people, the participation and commitment of the people, all affect the liturgical environment far more than we might imagine, and most certainly affect the liturgical celebration itself. All the added decorations in the world won't do what the liturgical environment must do—lead the people into the mystery of Christ being celebrated—if the people are not properly disposed as to why they are gathered in the first place. The ministry of those directly responsible for the liturgical environment, then, is really directed to why the assembly gathers. This ministry is not insignificant, to be sure.

Who are all these people—these liturgical environment ministers? This is actually not an easy question to answer! If we ask, Who are the lectors? it is easy to respond: those who proclaim the Scriptures at liturgy. The other “visible” liturgical ministers all have a rather well-defined task. Not necessarily so with the liturgical environment ministers. This ministry involves much more than adding decorations to a building. The ministry is often very, very broad and can even apply to other ministers. If we but stop and think a moment about this ministry, we might begin to name many people who are directly involved, for example, the sacristans who keep order and lay out the things necessary for liturgy, those who clean the linens and the church building itself, those liturgical artisans who enhance the sacred space appropriately for the various liturgical seasons or for myriads of different liturgies and other celebrations that might take place in church. Most often all this is taken for granted. It just gets done. Yes, it's all these behind-the-scenes people who tirelessly do so much week after week who contribute so much to the liturgy. Their ministry may be behind-the-scenes, but it is so very important! For this reason, principles and some questions for reflection are included at the end of the first five chapters so that the value of this ministry becomes clear.

While all ministry of the liturgical environment is dependent upon the skills and talents of a whole cadre of generous people, none of the decisions about what and how to do this ministry

should be the result of one person's whims or fancies—everything about the environment must reflect the theological and liturgical principles the church community holds dear. The liturgical environment is too important to be controlled by one person, even if one person does most of the ministry. The ministry of environment serves the liturgy and its purpose, as do all other ministries. This must always be kept in mind. The liturgical environment isn't the artistic playground for even the most gifted of artisans. It is the sacred space in which liturgy is celebrated so that the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ unfolds (SC 6). This is why working with and in the environment to enhance it isn't simply getting a *job* done (although at times it may seem like that); it is truly a *ministry* serving God and God's people.

Because of the value of this ministry, it (like all ministry) is more than simply getting a job done. Yes, there are tasks to be accomplished. To move, however, from doing a job to truly ministering is a matter of spirituality, of living the meaning of the ministry. The environment minister must live the sacred space, must experience daily the beauty of God all around us, must be other-centered in all the minister undertakes. Then, caring for the sacred space flows naturally from a spirit of appreciation for beauty and appropriateness, of generosity and self-giving.

Our buildings are more than simply gathering spaces: they shape for freedom or constraint, for participation or passivity, for community or individualism, for prayer or meaningless words, for uplifting hearts or deadly boredom. Care with the liturgical environment means care for the liturgy itself and the people who celebrate. While the tasks of this ministry are directed (necessarily so) to physical spaces and things, the ministry itself is directed to people and worship. The responsibilities entailed by this ministry are far more than satisfying minimal requirements for cleanliness and appropriate enhancements for seasons, occasions, and feasts. The responsibilities of the environment minister entail attention to members of the Body of Christ and how to environmentally stimulate them to celebrate the mystery of Christ with greater

self-emptying, fuller surrender to divine presence, more total self-giving that parallels the self-giving of Jesus Christ himself.

Because each liturgical environment is different, the principles and especially the practical suggestions of this book do not apply equally and in the same way to all spaces. Therefore, readers must be actively engaged in doing more than simply *reading* this book; readers must constantly evaluate, critique, and apply what is written here for a particular space. For example, if the sacred space is a small chapel, some things will be applied in a different way from how they would be applied for a cathedral space. Another example: if the sacred space is relatively new with seating configured more in the round or in a fan shape, some things will be applied in a different way from how they would be applied in a traditional, elongated Gothic structure. No two spaces are alike. For a sacred space to work well, everything about it must be directed to the celebration of a liturgy in this particular space for this specific occasion with this unique assembly.

It is hoped that this small book is of service to all those wonderful ministers who volunteer their time and talents for enhancing our sacred spaces to help make liturgy truly a beautiful celebration for the Lord. To this end and to the greater honor and glory of God, may we all minister with commitment and enthusiasm.

1

Assembly as Liturgical Environment

It may seem odd to begin a book on liturgical environment with people rather than the worship space itself. Understanding who the people are, what they are gathering to do, and how environment ministers can help the assembly enter more fully into the liturgy being celebrated is critical. It is a reflection that must be the foundation for all decisions concerning the practical enhancement of the liturgical environment. At first it might be tempting to skip over the topics addressed in this first chapter, skipping to the more practical helps in the last two chapters. Yet, without a firm grasp of the principles and theology captured in these first few pages of the book, whatever is done to the sacred space will simply be a shot in the dark.

Too often decisions about liturgy—from preparing a specific liturgical celebration to the overall design of a liturgy program for a community to the general concern for the sacred space—pay little enough attention to the liturgical understanding or principles that underlie them. In fact, all decisions reflect certain principles; sometimes there can even be conflicting principles at work. In something so important as liturgical celebration and preparing the sacred space for it, articulating these principles clearly and often and then constantly coming back to them and

monitoring the consistency of the decisions with respect to the principles is crucial. The more consistent the principles and decisions, the better the liturgical space can serve the liturgy and the community, and the easier it is to explain and justify particular decisions. In all preparation and celebration, what is key is preserving the visibility and participation of the *church* in her encounter with the Divine.

Church

One discussion that takes place almost any time the liturgical environment is considered from a theological perspective is whether it is *domus Dei* (the house of God) or *domus ecclesia* (the house of the church). To set these two in opposition is really to miss the point! To put the question another way, is liturgy directed to God or to the assembly? Primarily, of course, liturgy is prayer and so is directed to God. Yet since liturgy is communal prayer, the assembly itself must be an important consideration. A better understanding of who the assembly is helps environment ministers understand better how to enhance the environment so as to stimulate the communal prayer.

Through baptism we are made members of the Body of Christ, which is the church. This is who we are. Church is not a building, even though we talk about “going to church.” Church is first and foremost the assembly of the *people*, of the Body of Christ, Head and members. We are united with Christ and, as St. John so eloquently tells us, if we are one in Christ we are also one with him in God (see, e.g., John 17:20-23). So our liturgical space is both the house of God and the house of the church because here is where we encounter our triune God in most unique and privileged ways—in the gathered assembly as church; in the presider as the one who stands in our midst uniting us with the Head of the Body; in the word of God proclaimed; in the substantial presence of Christ in the eucharistic species (SC 7); in the calling down of the Holy Spirit on the gifts and the people; in the praise and thanksgiving offered to

the Father. It is this *encounter* between the Divine and human that takes place in liturgy that makes the sacred space so special and why we want it to be so sublimely beautiful and so diligently cared for.

People to Building to People

Different periods in the church's history have certainly reflected different understandings and emphases about liturgy, but it would lead us too far astray to include here a detailed chronicle of the development of different understandings of liturgy. Nevertheless, it is helpful to paint in broad brushstrokes major trends in such a development because this bit of history is essential for understanding some of the liturgical attitudes and problems with which we are dealing today and which affect how we think about the liturgical environment.

In the earliest history of the church's gathering for worship, there were no "churches," no dedicated physical spaces for worship. This was partly because Christianity wasn't a free religion until the emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan in AD 313; until this time Christians were careful about how they publicly practiced their ritual expressions. A more theological reason for this reluctance to have dedicated worship spaces, however, derived from Christians' realization that they themselves were the temples of the Holy Spirit (see, e.g., 1 Cor 3:16-17). These ancestors in our faith understood so well that God dwelled *within* them, contrary to their Jewish brothers and sisters whose temple was erected *among* them. The temple in Jerusalem, indeed, was considered a sacred place; but appreciating ourselves as the temple of the Holy Spirit whose divine life courses within us is surely a radically new revelation of God's presence.

During this early time the various Christian communities simply gathered in the private homes of members who had a dwelling large enough to accommodate the community. Eventually, as these "domestic churches" grew in numbers, the need arose to purchase a building and renovate it to make it suitable for

liturgical needs. During all this time the building itself was not as important as the gathering of the community within the building.

When Constantine issued his famous edict, Christianity became legal and Christians could freely practice their religion in the empire; by the end of the fourth century in the West it became the official religion of the empire. The Edict of Milan effectively ended persecution, and growth took place quite rapidly. The small, intimate house churches were no longer suitable to hold the larger numbers. It was about this time, then, that church buildings more in the order of what is familiar to us today came into use. Christians either bought at-hand buildings or borrowed the architecture of the day; large Roman buildings used for commerce and government were called “basilicas,” which were public buildings designed for their civil purpose. These early basilica buildings were different in meaning and use from what we call a basilica today—a church so designated because it has historical value and is the place where great growth in Christianity has taken place. As time went on, purchased public buildings became suitably adorned for the sacred actions that took place within them; thus were born magnificent structures for worship that had a special, sacred character about them in themselves. Even today we consecrate a new church building with holy chrism—the same oil used at baptism, confirmation, and holy orders for the consecration of people. Eventually the focus on people gathering gave way to a focus on the sacred place where the people gathered.

As the centuries passed the church became more and more identified with civil society and so the customs, dignity, and power enjoyed in civil society were paralleled in the church community. Instead of emphasizing the church as the Body of Christ, the church became much more hierarchically organized like civil society. This had dire consequences for worship. Liturgy was no longer the celebration of the Body of Christ. Rather, the clergy celebrated liturgy *for* the laity, who were left to their own devotional prayers. Thus side altars (so multiple Masses could be celebrated at the same time), shrines, stained-glass windows, and the like became important features of church buildings. Such a

hierarchically arranged church even gave birth to architectural styles (Gothic and Romanesque are two good examples, and many of us have worshiped often in such churches). This new architecture symbolized the underlying spirituality of the time: God is “up there” (thus the altar is “up high” with numerous steps leading up to it; the church building itself has spires leading the eye upward), a spirituality perhaps most eloquently captured in the high, vaulted ceilings that raise one’s eyes and hearts to the God who reigns in heaven above.

The manner of liturgical celebration, the prevailing spirituality, and the architectural styles all interacted to separate the laity even further from the liturgy. Eventually clear barriers were put into place; the communion railing became an architectural fixture that clearly delineated space reserved for the clergy and their holy acts and space for the laity who attended to their private, devotional prayers.

This situation of the laity being physically and spiritually separated from liturgical action persisted in the church for over a thousand years with few variations. Then Pope John XXIII convened the Second Vatican Council and the very first document promulgated (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, dated December 4, 1963) dealt with the renewal of liturgy. Its first paragraph states that the renewal of liturgy is to promote unity among Christians—a hint at the shift from understanding church primarily as building to understanding church primarily as people. *Lumen Gentium* (The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, November 21, 1964) strengthened this theological shift even more with its emphasis on the church as the “people of God.” A major work of renewal, then, has more to do with people than with buildings. We are asked once again to understand *ourselves* when assembled for liturgy as the church, the Body of Christ.

We’ve come full circle: from people to building back to people, at least in theory. Perhaps the major part of liturgical renewal still facing us is to *renew ourselves* so that we grasp more clearly *who we are* and *what we celebrate*: the Body of Christ, surrendering ourselves in making present the paschal sacrifice of

Christ to the praise and glory of God. Anything less than this is not only shortchanging liturgy, but it is woefully shortchanging who God has called us to be and to become.

Three Key Shifts after Vatican II

We move our discussion about the assembly forward when we pay particular attention to key concepts that *Sacrosanctum Concilium* of Vatican II put forth as the basis for a sound liturgical celebration. The conciliar teaching carries liturgy into the future at the same time that it respects the tradition from which liturgy arises. We focus on three key shifts from an understanding of liturgy prior to Vatican II that are basic for a good appreciation and care of sacred space: the nature of liturgy, the significance of the assembly, and people and liturgical space.

The Nature of Liturgy

Christian liturgy is a unique activity whereby Christ's paschal mystery—his dying and rising, his self-emptying and exaltation, his life and ministry, his passing through death to risen life, his unwavering obedience to his Father and consequent glorification—is made present in the here and now. Liturgy enacts the paschal mystery. There is a major shift in our post-Vatican II understanding of liturgy from that which gives us grace to that by which we ourselves participate in the mystery of Jesus Christ (which, of course, is grace-laden). In other words, there is an important shift in understanding of liturgy as that which the priest does *for us* as passive worshipers to that in which (led by the presider) we participate fully, consciously, and actively in surrendering ourselves to this mystery. Through the surrender we are transformed by God into being more perfect members of the Body of Christ who continue his saving ministry.

The Significance of the Assembly

As mentioned above (and we can't mention it often enough!), through baptism we Christians are made members of the Body

of Christ. At liturgy (that sacred act during which we unite ourselves with Jesus the Head of his Body in his saving/redemptive event) we act corporately as the Body of Christ to enact in the here and now the paschal mystery. The paschal mystery is not simply a historical event that happened long ago; it is the saving mystery of Christ that we celebrate and live each day. Liturgy is inherently a corporate act because it is a participation in the mystery of Christ, an activity that requires our being united as members of the Body with our Head. The key shift is from Christians participating in liturgy through their own private devotions to uniting themselves as his Body to the self-giving of Christ that liturgy enacts as a perpetual memorial of Christ's saving mission.

This basic understanding of liturgy and the church as the Body of Christ has important ramifications for a good understanding of the ministry of liturgical environment. Anything done in or to the environment, as already mentioned, is never the action of an individual's whims or likes. Everything about the environment and everything within the environment must serve the purpose of liturgy—to praise and thank God for God's mighty deeds of salvation as we surrender ourselves to the paschal mystery—and help the assembly surrender to the action of God within the liturgy. Environment cannot be overemphasized as a key factor in this process of encountering God and surrendering to the paschal mystery.

People and Liturgical Space

For centuries “church” has been largely understood to mean “building.” Our language points to this understanding in many ways; for example, we speak of “going to church.” Yet, “church” is people (specifically, baptized Christians who are the Body of Christ assembled to celebrate liturgy) and sacred space is defined by people and what they do, not by buildings and furniture. The post-Vatican II shift in emphasis is from space as an objective absolute (a building, sacred in and of itself and guaranteed so by its consecration) to space as personal and fluid (the people who are consecrated by their baptism determine a sacred space).

The gathered assembly itself is the first minister of liturgical environment. In other words, the liturgical assembly itself is an environment. This makes the important point that *how* we are together affects *how well* we do what we do together. For example, since liturgy is communal prayer, the assembly scattered as individuals all over the liturgical space (as frequently happens at daily Mass or liturgies other than Mass) radically affects whether the assembly prays *as community*. This point also challenges the configuration of the assembly itself, a serious and (usually) controversial discussion in the renovation or building of churches. What happens to communal prayer when the entire assembly is seated facing forward and, instead of seeing others as the Body of Christ, all that members of the assembly see is the backs of heads (as is typical in our older churches)? Sometimes the main objective to changing this seating arrangement (“I can’t pray when I’m looking at other people”) illustrates exactly the point: liturgy isn’t private prayer. New churches are generally being built in the round or in a fan shape so that members of the assembly are together in such a way that they see each other as well as the centers of liturgical action. This arrangement of the people who worship emphasizes the ministry of the assembly.

One of the more challenging issues with assembly seating (beyond the configuration of the seating) is getting the folks to sit together if the church isn’t full. Hospitality ministers (and/or greeters, ushers) can be very helpful with this. By sitting together, assembly members are more apt to participate, and to participate more fully they must let go of their private devotions during liturgy. Sitting together in one body is a clear symbol of the unity of the Body of Christ that is celebrating. At the same time that we promote sitting together, we must also respect “personal space”; in our North American society, sitting too closely together is not usually comfortable for many people. We must also caution here that promoting sitting together cannot shift the focus of liturgy from primarily being on God to primarily being on the assembly members. Sitting together as one Body is a witness to the corporate nature of liturgy.

Another seating issue concerns space for the physically challenged. Space must be provided to accommodate wheelchairs and walkers without these individuals being set off in a separate section so that they seem apart from the assembly. Comfortable accommodations for the elder members of the assembly who may walk more slowly than others or whose arthritic joints can't handle hard wooden pews must be considered. As far as possible all the seating ought to be similar in style. If pews and chairs are mixed, some can't be new and others old and marred, some seating comfortable and other seating hard and uncomfortable. These kinds of differences tend to create subtle distinctions in the assembly.

Ministers of the liturgical environment for the most part are not concerned with making decisions about the *configuration* of the assembly. However, these brief remarks do point to an important principle: *the liturgical environment necessarily includes the assembly space*. In practice all too often the color, flowers, and other environmental enhancements are concentrated in the sanctuary space. Those who prepare the liturgical environment must carefully consider the assembly space in their overall plans, and begin with the principle that the assembly itself is a significant part of the environment.

When we consider the assembly itself as environment, then everything about the assembly and the individuals who make it up is significant. Whether the members of the assembly prepare for liturgy and are spiritually and emotionally ready for the sacred action is a significant part of the environment because of how assembly members affect each other. Even something seemingly as insignificant as the attire of the assembly members affects how liturgy unfolds. At one time dressing for Mass wasn't an issue; one always put on one's "Sunday best." Men came to church in suits and ties and women in hats and gloves. In today's more relaxed North American society, dressing up simply isn't part of our usual routine. Yet we know that dress directly affects our attitudes and comportment. A beautifully (but not necessarily expensively!) dressed assembly is an effective environment in itself. Certainly, it would not be wise for a parish to announce a dress

code for liturgical celebrations! However, an occasional note in the Sunday bulletin about the importance of proper dress, the significance of all liturgical celebrations, and the recommendation that assembly members consider wearing “Sunday best” for weekly liturgy might go a long way to enhance not only the church environment but the liturgy itself.

Preparation

There is a kind of preparation upon which we can reflect that at first glance hardly seems like a topic concerning liturgical environment. The preparation of the community who gathers for liturgy is truly an issue of environment.

Everything about the liturgical environment must speak to the dignity and importance of the sacred actions that take place there. Ministers of the liturgical environment can tend to and control the physical environment. But if the overall attitude of the assembly members is boredom, nonparticipation, “let’s get this over with,” “going through the motions,” or isolation through choosing private prayer, then all the beauty of the liturgical environment cannot make up for what is being communicated through such body language. Yes, the assembly functions as part of the liturgical environment.

One way to counteract this negative body language that affects the assembly is to promote everyone’s *preparing* for liturgy. Some parishes include the citations for the next Sunday’s readings in the Sunday bulletin and encourage people to read and pray with these Scripture texts ahead of time. Other parishes make available bulletin inserts with reflections on the Sunday readings or the parish Sunday bulletin itself includes such material or other preparation aids that are readily available from religious publishers and bookstores. Perhaps some of these materials could be neatly arranged on book racks in the narthex or church entrance at the beginning of each liturgical year for purchase.

The important point here is that although the liturgical environment itself takes much and serious preparation, all the crea-

tivity, artistry, and care in the world cannot make up for an unprepared assembly.

For Reflection

Principles

1. Since Christian liturgy is where the paschal mystery is enacted and God is praised and thanked, the space where the liturgical assembly gathers must be worthy of this exalted activity.
2. The liturgical assembly (the Body of Christ gathered with the presider who makes visible Christ, the Head of his Body) is more important than the building itself.
3. *How* we are together in the liturgical space affects *what we do* in the space.
4. Any attention to the liturgical environment must necessarily include consideration of the whole space, including the assembly space.

Questions

1. What kind of liturgical environment helps the assembly more easily surrender to the dying and rising rhythm of the paschal mystery? What kind of liturgical environment helps the assembly praise and thank God with all their hearts?
2. What kinds of actions take place in the liturgical environment that alert the assembly to the fact that they are more important than the building? How does the environment help the assembly to remember their self-identity as the Body of Christ, as the church?
3. In my particular church or worship space, the configuration helps/hinders authentic worship in these ways . . .
4. The assembly space in my church or worship space is given a sense of importance by . . . I need to improve my attention to the assembly space in these ways . . . I pay attention to other parts of the sacred space by . . .