

General Guidelines

1. Advent (Violet)

Set up an Advent wreath and some violet to mark the season.

2. Christmas (White)

Set up a manger scene, Christmas trees, flowers(poinsettias), white to highlight the season, and other things which heighten the solemnity of the celebration.

3. Lent (Violet)

Set up a cross or crown of thorns or something to mark the suffering of Christ which helps remind us of how we are to do penance during Lent. Put up some violet but not much to mark the season.

4. Easter (White)

Make sure the Easter Candle is in the front and lit every mass. Set up all kinds of flowers, white to highlight the season, and other things which heighten the solemnity of the celebration.

5. Ordinary Time (Green)

Set up some green to mark the season. Maybe some plants?

(From: Built on Built of Living Stones: Art, Architecture, and Worship : *Guidelines of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops*)

The Liturgical Year: Seasonal Decorations

§ 122 § During the liturgical year the Church unfolds the whole mystery of Christ, from his incarnation and birth through his passion, death, and resurrection to his ascension, the day of Pentecost, and the expectation of his coming in glory. In its celebration of these mysteries, the Church makes these sacred events present to the people of every age.¹⁴⁸

§ 123 § The tradition of decorating or not decorating the church for liturgical seasons and feasts heightens the awareness of the festive, solemn, or penitential nature of these seasons. Human minds and hearts are stimulated by the sounds, sights, and fragrances of liturgical seasons, which combine to create powerful, lasting impressions of the rich and abundant graces unique to each of the seasons.

§ 124 § Plans for seasonal decorations should include other areas besides the sanctuary. Decorations are intended to draw people to the true nature of the mystery being celebrated rather than being ends in themselves. Natural flowers, plants, wreaths and fabric hangings, and other seasonal objects can be arranged to enhance the primary liturgical points of focus. The altar should remain clear and free-standing, not walled in by massive floral displays or the Christmas crib, and pathways in the narthex, nave, and sanctuary should remain clear.

§ 125 § These seasonal decorations are maintained throughout the entire liturgical season. Since the Christmas season begins with the Vigil Mass on Christmas Eve and ends with the baptism of the Lord, the placement and removal of Christmas decorations should coincide with

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these times. Since the Easter season lasts fifty days, planning will encompass ways to sustain the decor until the fiftieth day of Pentecost.

§ 126 § In the course of the liturgical year, the feasts and memorials of Our Lady and of saints with special significance for the parish afford opportunities to show devotion by adorning their images with tasteful floral arrangements or plants.

§ 127 § Fabric art in the form of processional banners and hangings can be an effective way to convey the spirit of liturgical seasons, especially through the use of color, shape, texture, and symbolic form. The use of images rather than words is more in keeping with this medium.

§ 128 § Objects such as the Advent wreath,¹⁴⁹ the Christmas crib,¹⁵⁰ and other traditional seasonal appointments proportioned to the size of the space and to the other furnishings can enhance the prayer and understanding of the parish community.

§ 129 § The use of living flowers and plants, rather than artificial greens, serves as a reminder of the gift of life God has given to the human community. Planning for plants and flowers should include not only the procurement and placement but also the continuing care needed to sustain living things.

(General Instruction of the Roman Missal)

I. GENERAL PRINCIPLES

288. For the celebration of the Eucharist, the people of God normally are gathered together in a church or, if there is no church or if it is too small, then in another respectable place that is nonetheless worthy of so great a mystery. Churches, therefore, and other places should be suitable for carrying out the sacred action and for ensuring the active participation of the faithful. Sacred buildings and requisites for divine worship should, moreover, be truly worthy and beautiful and be signs and symbols of heavenly realities.

289. Consequently, the Church constantly seeks the noble assistance of the arts and admits the artistic expressions of all peoples and regions. In fact, just as she is intent on preserving the works of art and the artistic treasures handed down from past centuries and, insofar as necessary, on adapting them to new needs, so also she strives to promote new works of art that are in harmony with the character of each successive age.

On account of this, in commissioning artists and choosing works of art to be admitted into a church, what should be required is that true excellence in art which nourishes faith and devotion and accords authentically with both the meaning and the purpose for which it is intended.

290. All churches should be dedicated or, at least, blessed. Cathedrals and parish churches, however, are to be dedicated with a solemn rite.

291. For the proper construction, restoration, and remodeling of sacred buildings, all who are involved in the work are to consult the diocesan commission on the Sacred Liturgy and sacred art.

The Diocesan Bishop, moreover, should use the counsel and help of this commission whenever it comes to laying down norms on this matter, approving plans for new buildings, and making decisions on the more important issues.

292. Church decor should contribute toward the church's noble simplicity rather than

ostentation. In the choice of materials for church appointments there should be a concern for genuineness of materials and an intent to foster the instruction of the faithful and the dignity of the entire sacred place.

293. A proper arrangement of a church and its surroundings that appropriately meets contemporary needs requires attention not only to the elements related more directly to the celebration of the sacred actions but also to those things conducive to the appropriate comfort of the faithful that are normally forthcoming in places where people regularly gather.

294. The People of God, gathered for Mass, has a coherent and hierarchical structure, which finds its expression in the variety of ministries and the variety of actions according to the different parts of the celebration. The general ordering of the sacred building must be such that in some way it conveys the image of the gathered assembly and allows the appropriate ordering of all the participants, as well as facilitating each in the proper carrying out of his function.

The faithful and the choir should have a place that facilitates their active participation. The priest celebrant, the deacon, and the other ministers have places in the sanctuary. Seats for concelebrants should also be prepared there. If, however, their number is great, seats should be arranged in another part of the church, but near the altar.

All these elements, even though they must express the hierarchical structure and the diversity of ministries, should nevertheless bring about a close and coherent unity that is clearly expressive of the unity of the entire holy people. Indeed, the character and beauty of the place and all its furnishings should foster devotion and show forth the holiness of the mysteries celebrated there.

Altars

305. Moderation should be observed in the decoration of the altar.

During Advent the floral decoration of the altar should be marked by a moderation suited to the character of this season, without expressing prematurely the full joy of the Nativity of the Lord. During Lent it is forbidden for the altar to be decorated with flowers. *Laetare* Sunday (Fourth Sunday of Lent), Solemnities, and Feasts are exceptions.

Floral decorations should always be done with moderation and placed around the altar rather than on its *mensa*.

Sacred Images

318. In the earthly Liturgy, the Church participates, by a foretaste, in that heavenly Liturgy which is celebrated in the holy city of Jerusalem toward which she journeys as a pilgrim, and where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God; and by venerating the memory of the Saints, she hopes one day to have some part and fellowship with them.

Thus, images of the Lord, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the Saints, in accordance with the Church's most ancient tradition, should be displayed for veneration by the faithful in sacred Buildings and should be arranged so as to usher the faithful toward the mysteries of faith celebrated there. For this reason, care should be taken that their number not be increased indiscriminately, and that they be arranged in proper order so as not to distract the faithful's attention from the celebration itself. There should usually be only one image of any given Saint. Generally speaking, in the ornamentation and arrangement of a church as far as images are concerned, provision should be made for the devotion of the entire community as well as for the beauty and dignity of the images.

II. SACRED FURNISHINGS IN GENERAL

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325. As in the case of the building of churches, so also regarding all sacred furnishings the Church admits the artistic style of each region and accepts those adaptations that are in keeping with the culture and traditions of each people, provided that all fit the purpose for which the sacred furnishings are intended. In this matter as well, a noble simplicity should be ensured such as is the best companion of genuine art.

326. In the choice of materials for sacred furnishings, besides those which are traditional, others are acceptable if by contemporary standards they are considered to be noble, are durable, and are well suited for sacred use. In the dioceses of the United States of America these materials may include wood, stone, or metal which are solid and appropriate to the purpose for which they are employed.

V. OTHER THINGS INTENDED FOR CHURCH USE

348. Besides sacred vessels and sacred vestments for which some special material is prescribed, other furnishings that either are intended for strictly liturgical use¹⁴⁰ or are in any other way admitted into a church should be worthy and suited to their particular purpose.

349. In a special way, care must be taken that the liturgical books, particularly the Book of the Gospels and the Lectionary, which are intended for the proclamation of the word of God and hence enjoy special veneration, really serve in a liturgical action as signs and symbols of heavenly realities and hence are truly worthy, dignified, and beautiful.

350. Furthermore, great attention is to be paid whatever is directly associated with the altar and the eucharistic celebration, e.g., the altar cross and the cross carried in procession.

351. Every effort should be made to ensure that even as regards objects of lesser importance the canons of art be appropriately taken into account and that noble simplicity come together with elegance.

Followign from ZENIT

ROME, 25 MAY 2004 (ZENIT)

Answered by Father Edward McNamara, professor of liturgy at the Regina Apostolorum Pontifical University.

Q: I have been searching for some type of directives regarding the decorating of the sanctuary. In the parish here we have a decorating committee that can do just about any type of decorating that it wants. Isn't there a book that contains what is permissible and what isn't? — A.R., Hinckley, Ohio

A: By decoration I suppose you mean the occasional decoration of the sanctuary (flowers, etc.) and not the overall structure of the sanctuary itself.

The U.S. bishops' conference has recently published an official document, "Built of Living Stones," which gives concrete guidelines for many aspects of church construction and design.

The document may be obtained from the conference itself or from Catholic bookstores.

Apart from this, some general norms of the Church regarding decorating the sanctuary are

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contained in the General Instruction of the Roman Missal, in Nos. 304 and following, which address some aspects directly regarding the decoration of the altar but whose principles may be applied to the sanctuary in general.

No. 304 states: "Out of reverence for the celebration of the memorial of the Lord and for the banquet in which the Body and Blood of the Lord are offered on an altar where this memorial is celebrated, there should be at least one white cloth, its shape, size, and decoration in keeping with the altar's design. When, in the dioceses of the United States of America, other cloths are used in addition to the altar cloth, then those cloths may be of other colors possessing Christian honorific or festive significance according to longstanding local usage, provided that the uppermost cloth covering the mensa (i.e., the altar cloth itself) is always white in color."

No. 305 reminds us that: "Moderation should be observed in the decoration of the altar."

This applies especially to floral decorations, which "should always be done with moderation and placed around the altar rather than on its mensa," and which should be especially moderate during Advent and which are forbidden during Lent except for the Laetare Sunday (Fourth Sunday of Lent), as well as solemnities and feasts.

No. 306 gives as a principle that "Only what is required for the celebration of the Mass may be placed on the mensa of the altar: namely, from the beginning of the celebration until the proclamation of the Gospel, the Book of the Gospels; then from the Presentation of the Gifts until the purification of the vessels, the chalice with the paten, a ciborium if necessary, and, finally, the corporal, the purificator, the pall, and the Missal." A microphone is also permitted when necessary.

This means that any other elements or symbols should not be placed on the altar.

No. 308 requires the use of a "cross, with the figure of Christ crucified upon it, either on the altar or near it, where it is clearly visible to the assembled congregation. It is appropriate that such a cross, which calls to mind for the faithful the saving Passion of the Lord, remain near the altar even outside of liturgical celebrations."

No. 307 deals specifically with candles but also makes another valid criterion with respect to general decorum: "The candles ... are to be appropriately placed either on or around the altar in a way suited to the design of the altar and the sanctuary so that the whole may be well balanced and not interfere with the faithful's clear view of what takes place at the altar or what is placed on it."

Further on, No. 318 speaks of the use of sacred images: "In the earthly Liturgy, the Church participates, by a foretaste, in that heavenly Liturgy which is celebrated in the holy city of Jerusalem toward which she journeys as a pilgrim, and where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God; and by venerating the memory of the Saints, she hopes one day to have some part and fellowship with them.

"Thus, images of the Lord, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the Saints, in accordance with the

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Church's most ancient tradition, should be displayed for veneration by the faithful in sacred buildings and should be arranged so as to usher the faithful toward the mysteries of faith celebrated there. For this reason, care should be taken that their number not be increased indiscriminately, and that they be arranged in proper order so as not to distract the faithful's attention from the celebration itself. There should usually be only one image of any given Saint. Generally speaking, in the ornamentation and arrangement of a church as far as images are concerned, provision should be made for the devotion of the entire community as well as for the beauty and dignity of the images."

From these numbers of the GIRM it may be inferred that what the Church desires with regard to the decoration of the sanctuary is an overall sense of moderation and well-balanced dignity, limiting, as far as possible, the use of merely decorative objects that have no direct liturgical function and avoidance of creating obstacles to the clear view of the assembly or impediments to its concentration on the celebration of the sacred mystery itself.

Thus, while the decoration of the sanctuary should remain fairly stable, there is ample space for traditional elements that reflect the liturgical season (Advent wreath, poinsettias at Christmastide, etc.) and for the occasional use of truly artistic banners on major feasts.

Although artistic banners may be used it is best to avoid the use of message posters in the sanctuary as well as other occasional articles such as children's drawings and the like which might draw attention away from the centrality of the celebration.

These objects are not necessarily excluded from the precincts of the church but should preferably be placed in some other suitable place outside the sanctuary. ZE04042524

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Follow-up: Decorating the Sanctuary [from 06-08-2004]

Many readers asked for clarifications regarding the May 25 column on decorating the sanctuary. A member of the military asked if a crucifix may be placed upon the altar during the celebration of Mass.

No. 308 of the General Instruction of the Roman Missal clearly permits this option, which is often necessary in situations where Mass is celebrated outside of a permanent chapel.

Such a crucifix would usually be placed at the front of the altar in a central position directly in front of the celebrant with the corpus facing toward the altar. In such a case the crucifix should not be so large as to obscure the faithful's view of the sacred action, nor so small as to be practically invisible. There are many thin metal crosses that can perfectly fulfill this task.

Related to what should be on the altar, a reader referred to a custom in one parish: "During Sunday Mass, at the preparation of the gifts, a given family comes up to cover the altar. First, they put down an altar cloth, always the color of the day or feast. Then, they put down a corporal. Then they set down several purificators which will be used at Communion time.

"After Communion, the same family comes forward again. They fold and remove the corporal

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and any purificators which might still be there, fold up the altar cloth, bow, and take all these items out of sight. The closing prayer, announcements, and blessing, are all said with the altar-table bare, as if stripped as on Good Friday and Holy Saturday."

Perhaps this is a rather radical interpretation of GIRM, No. 306: "Only what is required for the celebration of the Mass may be placed on the mensa of the altar." But this practice certainly does not correspond to liturgical norms.

GIRM No. 117, treating of the articles to be prepared before Mass, states: "The altar is to be covered with at least one white cloth. In addition, on or next to the altar are to be placed candlesticks with lighted candles: at least two in any celebration, or even four or six, especially for a Sunday Mass or a holy day of obligation ..."

No. 118 continues: "On the credence table: the chalice, a corporal, a purificator, and, if appropriate, the pall; the paten and, if needed, ciboria; bread for the Communion of the priest who presides, the deacon, the ministers, and the people; cruets containing the wine and the water, unless all of these are presented by the faithful in procession at the Offertory; the vessel of water to be blessed, if the asperges occurs; the Communion-plate for the Communion of the faithful; and whatever is needed for the washing of hands."

Thus it is clear that these things should be prepared beforehand and not during Mass. Likewise the preparation of the altar, especially the extending the corporal and preparing the sacred vessels, is preferably undertaken by the deacon or, if lacking, by the acolytes.

The altar should be habitually covered even outside of Mass, although it is customary in many places to protect the white altar cloth outside of Mass by covering it with another cloth. This cloth should be removed some time before the Eucharistic celebration begins.

If stripping the altar after Mass were a regular practice then the rubrics requiring this action during the Easter triduum would have no significance at all.

A reader from the Philippines asked if flowers were forbidden on the altar.

It is true that GIRM No. 305 does not use the word "forbidden" when referring to flowers being placed upon the altar, but certainly indicates a clear preference. When read in tandem with the text of No. 306 quoted above, on placing only what is essential upon the altar, I believe it becomes more than a mere preference.

Even though there may be some rare exceptions to this general norm, I suggest that we should always try to follow the clear sense of the rule which best reflect what the Church desires for the liturgy.

On this topic readers may wish to consult an excellent recent article, "In Praise of Flowers," published in the March/April edition of the Environment & Art Letter. This recently revamped newsletter, produced by the Archdiocese of Chicago's Liturgy Training Publications, should prove to be a useful resource for parishes on all aspects of church decoration.

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Several readers asked about the appropriateness of having national flags in the sanctuary.

Surprisingly, there are no regulations of any kind governing the display of flags in Roman Catholic churches. Neither the Code of Canon law, nor the liturgical books of the Roman rite comment on this practice. As a result, the question of whether and how to display a national or other flag in a church is left up to the judgment of the diocesan bishop, who in turn often delegates this to the discretion of the pastor.

It appears that the origin of the display of the American flag in many U.S. parishes stems from the custom of offering prayers for those who served during World War II. At that time, many bishops and pastors provided a book of remembrance near the American flag, requesting prayers for loved ones — especially those serving their country in the armed forces — as a way of keeping before the attention of the faithful the needs of military families.

After the war the custom of having the flag present in the sanctuary, often accompanied by the pontifical standard, continued even in periods with no major international conflicts.

The practice, while not confined to the United States, is not widespread in other countries and is usually confined to certain churches of particular national importance.

The Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City, for example, displays a large national flag near the image of the Patroness of America and in another part of the church the flags of all the nations of North and South America.

The U.S. bishops' Committee on the Liturgy has in the past encouraged pastors not to place the flag within the sanctuary itself, in order to reserve that space for the altar, the ambo, the presidential chair and the tabernacle. Instead, the suggestion has been made that the American flag be placed outside the sanctuary, or in the vestibule of the church together with a book of prayer requests. It remains, however, for the diocesan bishop to determine regulations in this matter.

Personally I would hold that national flags are best kept out of the sanctuary and the practice should not be introduced where no custom exists. If used, however, they should be discreet and of modest dimensions.

Finally, a Canadian reader asked if GIRM No. 318 meant that only one title of the Blessed Virgin may be placed in the church. The text says:

"Thus, images of the Lord, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the Saints, in accordance with the Church's most ancient tradition, should be displayed for veneration by the faithful in sacred buildings and should be arranged so as to usher the faithful toward the mysteries of faith celebrated there. For this reason, care should be taken that their number not be increased indiscriminately, and that they be arranged in proper order so as not to distract the faithful's attention from the celebration itself. There should usually be only one image of any given Saint. Generally speaking, in the ornamentation and arrangement of a church as far as images are

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concerned, provision should be made for the devotion of the entire community as well as for the beauty and dignity of the images."

This is basically a pastoral norm that strives to strike a balance between the needs of the liturgy and the private devotion the faithful.

In order to serve the liturgy, the norm indicates that images should not be so numerous as to distract the faithful during the celebration.

At the same time it asks that provision should be made for the devotion of the entire community so that images should be set up to cater for those devotions most deeply held by the local community, not excluding the use of votive lamps before the images.

The reason the document says that there should not be more than one image of any saint set up for veneration recalls certain excesses of former times in which more than one altar was dedicated to the same saint.

However, I do not think that the prohibition of more than one image would exclude images not explicitly set up for veneration as when, for example, in addition to a statue of a church's patron saint there are several murals or stained glass windows that illustrate episodes of the saint's life.

Nor would it exclude adding another image of the Blessed Virgin if pastorally advisable. For example, if, due to demographic change, a parish dedicated to the Virgin of Loreto acquired a significant Hispanic population there would be no reason to exclude the pastor setting up an alcove to Our Lady of Guadalupe to respond to the devotional traditions of the people.

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