

The Liturgy Magazine for the Whole Parish  
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# Rite

**Welcoming the Lord**

**Timing Midnight Mass**

Christian McConnell, PHD

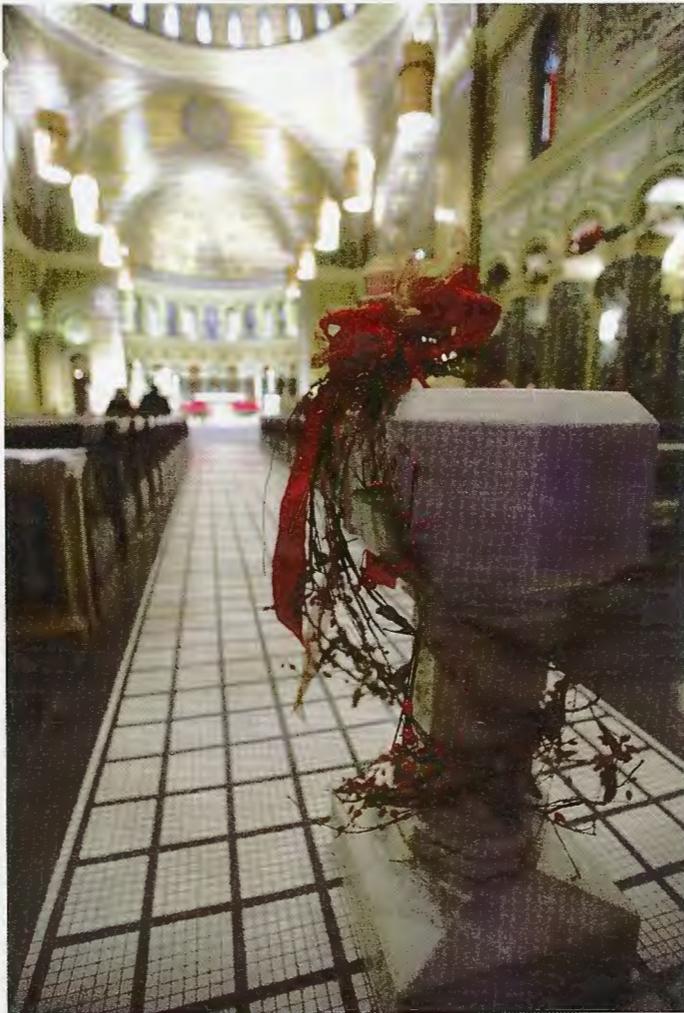
**Re-evangelizing Estranged Catholics**

Karoline Ferrell

**With Love Beyond All Telling**

Catherine Dooley, OP

# Balancing Liturgical, Cultural, and Devotional Decor



The decor should serve the liturgy.

## Jill Maria Murdy

During each liturgical season, images and colors portray the time of the year that the Church is observing. At Advent and Christmas, the glow of candles, the smell of pine wreaths, and the sounds of carols evoke the seasons. As the following paragraph from *Built of Living Stones* explains, by appealing to the senses, a lasting mark can be made on the assembly.

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. (BLS, #123)

However, sometimes the impression created is not the one anticipated. Church decor may go wrong when priorities are not established and many themes are in one space. At Advent and Christmas, the quandary may be more apparent than usual of how to blend the liturgical season, ethnic and cultural traditions, and popular piety to create a spiritually and aesthetically pleasing environment that serves the liturgy. The range of feasts, solemnities, and celebrations are so varied that it is easy for the decor to become distracting. During the weeks of Advent, the Advent wreath will be blessed, the feasts of Saint Nicholas and Our Lady of Guadalupe, and the solemnity of the Immaculate Conception and the memorial of Saint Lucy observed. Both a giving tree and Jesse tree may be decorated, the O Antiphons prayed, and the Las Posadas enacted. During the Christmas season, we celebrate not only the birth of Christ but the feasts of Saints Stephen and John and the Holy Innocents and the solemnities of Mary, Mother of God, Epiphany, and the Baptism of the Lord.

## THE SEASONS

The Advent and Christmas seasons are a perfect example of a possibility of too much decor.

I encourage those creating a temporary environment or permanent liturgical art to reread the documents regularly. They provide many of the guidelines and tools you need to make decisions from a liturgical perspective. *Built of Living Stones* and the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal 2002* should be your compass. They are available at <http://www.usccb.org/liturgy/livingstonesind.shtml>, <http://www.usccb.org/liturgy/documents/menu.shtml>. As you reread them, employ the lens of the appropriate season. From paragraphs 123 and 127, a checklist of questions can be gleaned. The following are questions that I have formulated.

- What is the nature of the season? Is it penitential? Joyous? What do I want people to walk away with as a lasting impression?
- Do my plans carry throughout the entire church building? What about the exterior? The narthex? The font? The area in which the Blessed Sacrament is reserved? Does this decor lead

one to the Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist, Liturgy of the Hours, or have the objects become the focal point themselves.

- Will my decor make it over the long haul? Is it too limited in appearance, structure, or design? Is it good art and spirituality or trite and overly pious?
- Is the devotional display tasteful? Is that devotion visible on the appropriate feast day, or does it override the church calendar? How do we differentiate a feast day that is especially important to the worshipping community? Does the statuary fit the congregation?

A parish may want to establish a space in the narthex or at a side altar that reflects the changing nature of some of the smaller feasts during the season. When a space changes regularly, people will visit it weekly. The area could be designed as hands-on or geared toward children. Youngsters will pull their parents toward the space at every opportunity. You might be subtly encouraging devotion in a child. Do not try to represent everything. Determine which feasts are dear to the assembly.

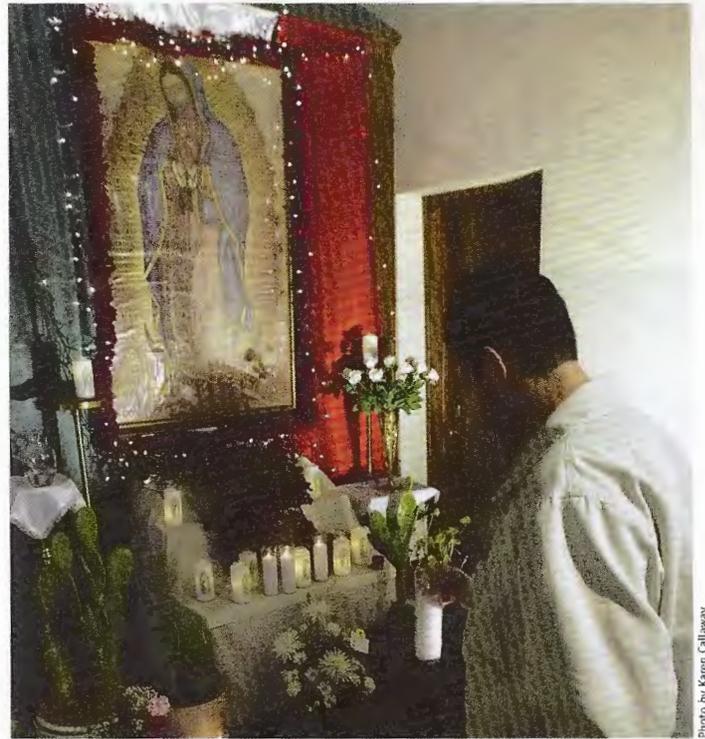
## THE BIG PICTURE

When a neighborhood undergoes a transformation in ethnic makeup, the devotional practices of the parish may change as well. Addressing concerns that may arise requires an ongoing discussion that includes how to accommodate the history and origins of the parish with the current practices and makeup. Perhaps Our Lady of Chechnya was important to the group who attended the parish decades ago, but Our Lady of Guadalupe may resonate more with parishioners now. Maybe an image of Saint Benedict the African would speak louder to parishioners than Saint Benedict of Nursia.

The pastoral nature of paragraphs 137 and 138 of BLS make including them here appropriate.

The placement of images can be a challenge, especially when a number of cultural traditions are part of a single parish community and each has its own devotional life and practices. Restraint in the number and prominence of sacred images is encouraged to help people focus on the liturgical action that is celebrated in the church. Separate alcoves for statues or icons can display a variety of images through the year. Some parishes designate an area as the shrine for an image that is being venerated on a given day or for a period of time, such as the image of a saint on his or her feast day. (BLS, 137)

It is important that the images in the church depict saints for whom devotion currently exists in the parish. Particularly desirable is that a significant image of the patron of the church be fittingly displayed, as well as an image of Mary, the Mother of God, as a fitting tribute to her unique role in the plan of salvation. As time passes and demographics change, saints who were once the object of veneration by many parishioners may at another time be venerated by only a few. When this happens, these images could be removed,



A side altar or area in the narthex may be devoted to a feast the parish especially cherishes.

provided sensitivity is shown with regard to the piety of the faithful and the impact on the building. (BLS, 138)

Parishes that need to deal with these issues should first pray over them as a community. Resolving them will require a long process with prayer and worship commissions, the pastoral council, staff, and perhaps an ad hoc committee. This should be regarded as a process without a rush to make a decision. Remember that faith and tradition are delicate areas. Parishioners who are part of a decision are more likely to welcome it.

Any removal of statuary should be done with reverence and respect. However, sometimes the statuary may need to be placed elsewhere. If that image of Our Lady of Chechnya is no longer appropriate for the church itself, is there a way to incorporate it into a wall that traces the parish history? Is there an area to create a mini-museum that might show old statuary, retired vestments, and furnishings that are inevitably in some closet collecting dust?

Consider a prayer service remembering the parish's ancestors and petitioning for prayers for current members. Ritualizing changes and transitions make them less painful and provide an opportunity for grieving and rejoicing.

You will do well to remember that a church is much more than an architectural structure. Gathered within it are the living, breathing, worshipping body of Christ. **R**

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