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# Rite



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# Reshaping the Lenten Space



Photo © Maria Langstaff

Nonflowering plants may be part of the Lenten décor.

## Jill Maria Murdy

Sometimes environment teams rely too easily on themes of years past. Void of energy, they may resort to the cacti and sand that previously inspired them.

Spending time with the scriptures of the season can lead to another prayerful environment. Liturgical art and environment commissions that study and discuss the Lenten scriptures will bring a spiritual depth to decor considerations that will reflect the season. Having meditated on the readings, concerns will penetrate the season's essence. It is likely that no one will bring up decorating the church with sand and cacti.

### LENTEN SCRIPTURES

In the readings of the First Sunday of Lent, Year A, we hear of Jesus' temptation in the desert. The Lenten weekday readings recall Moses and the Israelites in the desert. After those passages, we do not hear again of the desert.

Desert images are not always relevant to parishioners. In the early centuries, monks traveled to the desert to fight their demons, much as Jesus went to a lonely place to pray. But many of us do not live within the confines of the monastery. Nor do we live in the desert wilderness. A young mother who stayed up all night with a colicky baby knows different demons than an 18-year-old boy, a middle-aged woman, or an elderly couple. Praying

with the scriptures aids the liturgical environment team in reaching out to all age groups and stations in life. Other than the desert image, what do the Lenten scriptures hold?

Subsequent to the first week of Lent, we hear about the Transfiguration of the Lord, the woman at the well, the blind man given sight, and the raising of Lazarus. While respecting the austere nature of Lent, perhaps hint at living water, fire and light, or the Resurrection that will unfold in glory at the Easter Vigil. You might aim for the Lenten environment to reflect the prayers and actions of the parish.

### ILLUMINATING ACTIONS

Consider incorporating a specific prayer or even an encyclical into the life of the parish during Lent. The text could flow through the music of the liturgy, the decor of the narthex, and the spirit of commissions, and adult and children's faith formation sessions. Among considerations could be the encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, by Pope Benedict XVI, and the following prayer by Saint Teresa of Avila

Christ has no body now but yours  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours  
Yours are the eyes through which He looks  
compassion on this world  
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

Should the parish decide meditating upon "Christ Has No Body but Yours," World Library Publications distributes a piece by that name arranged by Steven Warner; GIA has that title by David Ogden; and Oregon Catholic Press offers an octavo by Willard Jabusch.

If meditating upon *Deus Caritas Est* throughout Lent, the assembly could chant "Ubi Caritas" during liturgies and also before faith formation sessions and parish commission meetings. Parts of the text of the encyclical could become the focus of prayer at faith formation and commission meetings.

A parish could enhance its ministry by reflecting on the meaning of *Deus Caritas Est*, 28.

The Church is one of those living forces: she is alive with the love enkindled by the Spirit of Christ. This love does not simply offer people material help, but refreshment and care for their souls, something which often is even more necessary than material support.

Environment, social justice, liturgy planning, and parish life commissions could work together to demonstrate this love. Photos in the narthex could illustrate how members of the parish act as the living body of Christ. Consider including among the images students on a youth outreach trip or visiting a nursing



home, hospitality in the parish, volunteers for Habitat for Humanity or other community efforts, ministers of care bringing Communion to the sick, missionary efforts, and prison ministries. This also would serve to inform parishioners of activities within the assembly, so that they may support them through prayer and donations.

A display in the narthex, too, could provide a place for members to bring in a representation of a bad habit they are giving up for Lent. To replace those habits, available on the table could be prayers, sites of retreat houses, volunteer possibilities, and suggestions for healthier eating and exercising. The display could provide a way to participate in almsgiving, with suggestions of donating the cost of a latte or pack of cigarettes to feed a family or sponsor a child.

By utilizing the gifts of several groups, and the aesthetic talents of your parish artists, awareness may be raised in a fashion that none of you dreamed possible, and in doing so, the true and ineffable spirit of Lent may be embraced. As *Deus Caritas Est*, 18 reminds:

Only my readiness to encounter my neighbor and to show him love makes me sensitive to God as well. Only if I serve my neighbor can my eyes be opened to what God does for me and how much he loves me. The saints—consider the example of Blessed Teresa of Calcutta—constantly renewed their capacity for love of neighbor from their encounter with the Eucharistic Lord, and conversely this encounter acquired its realism and depth in their service to others. Love of God and love of neighbor are thus inseparable, they form a single commandment . . . Love grows through love. Love is “divine” because it comes from God and unites us to God; through this unifying process it makes us a “we” which transcends our divisions and makes us one, until in the end God is “all in all.” (1 Corinthians 15:28)

Throughout this article I have encouraged expanding the horizons of the liturgical environment. However, no two parishes are in the same place, so adapt these ideas to your worship space, or let them be leaven for your creative process. Remember to communicate with the parish. The assembly that understands a focus in the parish is more likely to embrace it.

No matter how your parish reflects on this penitential season, be mindful of the following basics.

### STATUES AND HOLY WATER

Remember that current norms state that, if statues are to be veiled, it is done in the fifth week of Lent, and that the holy water fonts are not to be drained until the Triduum.

### VESTMENTS

The quality and texture of the materials used in the vestments can set the tone. They also can blend or clash with your environment. A bright purple silky vestment filled with symbols sends a different message than a simple, dark woven cloth. Vestments with a crown of thorns and busy appliques do not enhance the message.



Photo © John Zick

### NATURAL MATERIALS

The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, 305 tells us that no flowering plants are to be used during Lent. Still, many natural elements may be used artistically. For instance, the tall, flowing dried grass at the side of the highway could be placed in earthenware pots or woven baskets. Perhaps a potter or basket weaver in the parish could help out. Consider, too, milkweed pods, rocks, driftwood, dried twigs, and pussy willows. Picking plants at a nearby marsh in the fall will lower your expenses. If such environments are not nearby, craft stores carry such items. Spraying dried grasses with hair spray will keep them from falling apart. Also, apply a fireproofing spray or take care that dried grasses are kept away from candles or incense for safety purposes.

Always remember to include the narthex and church exterior in creating a unified liturgical presence. May God bless your Lenten journey. **R**

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