

The Liturgy Magazine for the Whole Parish  
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# Rite

## Journeying through Holy Week

### The Processional Nature of Holy Week

Paul Turner

### The Service of Light

Catherine Dooley, OP

### Dismissing Catechumens

Jerry Galipeau, DMIN



# The Challenge of Decor

Jill Maria Murdy



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When beginning the daunting task of creating a Holy Week environment consider that:

- Liturgical colors include red on Palm Sunday, purple through Wednesday of Holy Week, white on Holy Thursday, red for Good Friday, and white for the Easter Vigil and the Easter season.
- The Triduum is not three services but one connected liturgy. Creating a changing environment that honors the liturgy's integrity is challenging.
- There are many processions and liturgical actions this week. Liturgies often have standing-room only crowds and require extra seating, which limits areas for decor.
- We employ many sacred symbols, including palms, holy oils, fire, water, darkness, and light.

- Environment begins outside the church and includes the narthex and church proper.

Committees make the mistake of trying to come up with something new for Holy Week annually, or err on the side of "we've always done it that way," and never change. Find a balance between comfortable and familiar and mundane.

I speak of "creating an environment" rather than "decorating the church," because the mindset employed influences the outcome. Pope John Paul II illustrated this in his *Letter to Artists*:

None can sense more deeply than you artists, ingenious creators of beauty that you are, something of the pathos with which God at the dawn of creation looked upon the work of his hands. A glimmer of that feeling has shone so often in your eyes when—like the artists of every age—captivated by the hidden power of sounds and words, colors and shapes, you have admired the work of your inspiration, sensing in it some echo of the mystery of creation with which God, the sole creator of all things, has wished in some way to associate you.

Decorating is a chore and more commercial concept. Creating an environment is a prayerful process and an artistic activity. The longer an environment team works together, the truer this becomes.

For many years I arranged the chapel with the same woman. We reached a point where we were simpatico and no longer needed to define divisions of labor. If one of us felt creative, that person took the lead. We accomplished our labor in reverent silence, breaking it to confer or offer a needed hand. This is not easy to do in a parish with many volunteers needing guidance, but it is an ideal for which to strive.

## PALM SUNDAY

This celebration includes the triumphal entry in Jerusalem and despair on the cross. The decor consists of palms and blood red cloth. A variety of palms enhances the liturgy. Most parishes purchase these, but in areas like Florida or California fresh local palm fronds can be used.

Place the palms in baskets covered with red cloth. Affix palms and red ribbons to the processional cross. Make sure the first Gospel is proclaimed and the procession begins in a stately environment.

Children can carry fan palms in procession and place them in the sanctuary as the liturgy unfolds. Banners with bells produce a festive opening processional that contrasts with the Passion.

## HOLY THURSDAY

Create a dignified space for the newly blessed holy oils that are carried in the opening procession. Lights or candles dress up a permanent ambry or table display. This is the first time we have seen white or heard a "Gloria" since the beginning of Lent. The

decor should reflect the richness of this evening. A full white altar cloth replaces the simpler Lenten one.

If foot-washing preparations happen before the liturgy begins, take care not to create a cluttered look; or set up foot-washing stations during the liturgy. This involves careful choreography and planning. A rug or carpet piece on the area protects the floor underneath and avoids the possibility of slipping.

Prepare candles for the transfer of the Eucharist. If parishioners keep vigil over the Blessed Sacrament, tall candles are appropriate. Otherwise, seven-day glass vigil globes provide a safer option. The church proper should not have flowers, but it is permissible to place a single lily or bouquet near the altar of repose.

Keep in mind that we strip the church after tonight, so simplicity is a good idea. The white will speak powerfully enough. Remember to empty the holy water font.



Photo © John Zich

## GOOD FRIDAY

The highlights of Good Friday are the Passion proclamation and Veneration of the Cross. A large cross draped with red outside the church creates the mood as people enter the church, and provides witness to passersby. Rubrics tell us to venerate one cross. This can stand in the narthex before the liturgy and be carried into the church during the service.

In my parish, a large cross is held as people approach two by two to venerate. In another church, the permanently mounted cross and corpus are hung low enough so people kneel or prostrate themselves before it and reach up and touch the wood of the cross. Whatever you do, make sure that the people can access it easily. Consider those whose knees do not bend, and people in wheelchairs who cannot climb steps.

## EASTER VIGIL AND THE EASTER SEASON

Ritual actions move from an outside Easter fire through the church. The environment must fit these locations, as well as the baptismal font, and the area where the parish receives those participating in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. It should look like one large space. Outside, drape the cross in white, and attach banners along the walkway to shepherd's crooks, garden flags, or light posts.

Combine white with gold or pastel shades of material for banners, flags, and vestments. Lilies are the traditional Easter flower, but other spring flowers may be used when Easter is early or late. Choose flowers and plants that last the season or are easily replaceable. No candle should be taller than the Easter candle.

Floor space is at a premium because of the night's many rituals. Keep the font accessible for Baptisms and for the congregation to come forward to bless themselves with new holy water. Similarly, do not put flowers in the way of RCIA actions, and check visibility of the altar and ambo from every part of the church.

In *To Crown the Year* (LTP 1995), Peter Mazar suggests adding banners and plants at key points and letting the church's

decor spread throughout the liturgy. This adds to the solemnity of the Vigil and allows the environment crew to participate fully in the Triduum, but is difficult to do well and requires careful planning and rehearsals.

If the cantor and choir are stationed in front of the church, dress up a basic black music stand with cloth or invest in a beautiful permanent stand. Bunting over the choir loft and doorways adds a wonderful touch. A white cloth could be draped carefully behind the cross.

## CAUTIONARY NOTES

Just as the liturgy is alive and breathing, so should everything associated with it. Never settle for artificial plants and wreaths. Church architecture and the parish community's charism play large factors in what works within a given space. Liturgy is about prayer not performance, and rituals within the liturgy are the most important elements. Environments should be beautiful and striking but are secondary and always a backdrop to the liturgy.

## RESOURCES

Peter Mazar, *To Crown the Year*, LTP, 1995; *Built of Living Stones*, USCCB, 2000; <http://www.nccbuscc.org/liturgy/livingstonesind.shtml>; the General Instruction of the Roman Missal USCCB 2003; <http://www.nccbuscc.org/liturgy/girm/index.shtml>; *Liturgiam Authenticum*, 2004; John Paul II *Letter to Artists*, 1999; [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/letters/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_let\\_23041999\\_artists\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_23041999_artists_en.html). **R**

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