Environment and Art in Catholic Worship

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Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy
National Conference of Catholic Bishops
called to worship must be concerned about the vital role art and environment play in that central action of the community of faith, the household of the Lord.

Archbishop John Quinn
Chairman
Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy

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ENVIRONMENT AND ART IN CATHOLIC WORSHIP

1. Faith involves a good tension between human modes of expressive communications and God himself, whom our human tools can never adequately grasp. God transcends. God is mystery. God cannot be contained in or confined by any of our words or images or categories.

2. While our words and art forms cannot contain or confine God, they can, like the world itself, be icons, avenues of approach, numinous presences, ways of touching without totally grasping or seizing. Flood, fire, the rock, the sea, the mountain, the cloud, the political situations and institutions of succeeding periods — in all of them Israel touched the face of God, found help for discerning a way, moved toward the reign of justice and peace. Biblical faith assures us that God covenants a people through human events and calls the covenanted people to shape human events.

3. And then in Jesus, the Word of God is flesh: "This is what we proclaim to you: what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked upon and our hands have touched — we speak of the word of life." 1
4. Christians have not hesitated to use every human art in their celebration of the saving work of God in Jesus Christ, although in every historical period they have been influenced, at times inhibited, by cultural circumstances. In the resurrection of the Lord, all things are made new. Wholeness and healthiness are restored, because the reign of sin and death is conquered. Human limits are still real and we must be conscious of them. But we must also praise God and give God thanks with the human means we have available. God does not need liturgy; people do, and people have only their own arts and styles of expression with which to celebrate.

5. Like the covenant itself, the liturgical celebrations of the faith community (Church) involve the whole person. They are not purely religious or merely rational and intellectual exercises, but also human experiences calling on all human faculties: body, mind, senses, imagination, emotions, memory. Attention to these is one of the urgent needs of contemporary liturgical renewal.

6. Historically, music has enjoyed a preeminence among the arts of public worship, and there is no clear evidence to justify denying it the same place today. The Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy, therefore, published guidelines (Music in Catholic Worship, 1972) encouraging attention to music, both instrumental and choral/vocal. This companion booklet, Environment and Art in Catholic Worship, offers guidelines to encourage the other arts necessary for a full experience in public worship. The two booklets, therefore, should be used together, complementing one another, by those responsible for planning and conducting liturgical celebrations. For that reason, music is excluded from the specific concerns of the following pages.

7. If we maintain that no human words or art forms can contain or exhaust the mystery of God’s love, but that all words and art forms can be used to praise God in the liturgical assembly, then we look for criteria to judge music, architecture, and the other arts in relation to public worship.2

8. The reason for offering principles to guide rather than blueprints to follow was stated clearly by the Council fathers: “The Church has not adopted any particular style of art as her own; it has admitted styles from every period according to the natural talents and circumstances of peoples, and the needs of the various rites. Thus, in the course of the centuries, she has brought into being a treasury of art which must be carefully preserved. The art of our own days, coming from every race and region, shall also be given free scope in the Church, provided that it adorns the sacred buildings and holy rites with due reverence
and honor; thereby it is enabled to contribute its own voice to that wonderful chorus of praise. . . .

I. THE WORSHIP OF GOD AND ITS REQUIREMENTS

LITURGY AND TRADITION
9. Liturgy has a special and unique place in the life of Christians in the local churches, their communities of faith. Each Church gathers regularly to praise and thank God, to remember and make present God's great deeds, to offer common prayer, to realize and celebrate the kingdom of peace and justice. That action of the Christian assembly is liturgy.

10. Common traditions carried on, developed and realized in each community make liturgy an experience of the Church which is both local and universal. The roots as well as the structure of its liturgical celebrations are biblical and ecclesial, asserting a communion of believers of all times and places. This tradition furnishes the symbol language of that action, along with structures and patterns refined through the centuries of experience, and gives the old meanings new life in our time, our place, with our new knowledge, talents, competencies, arts. Therefore, this celebration is that of a community at a given place and time, celebrated with the best of its resources, talents and arts in the light of our own tradition.4

A CLIMATE OF HOSPITALITY
11. As common prayer and ecclesial experience, liturgy flourishes in a climate of hospitality: a situation in which people are comfortable with one another, either knowing or being introduced to one another; a space in which people are seated together, with mobility, in view of one another as well as the focal points of the rite, involved as participants and not as spectators.5

THE EXPERIENCE OF MYSTERY
12. The experience of mystery which liturgy offers is found in its God-consciousness and God-centeredness. This involves a certain beneficial tension with the demands of hospitality, requiring a manner and an environment which invite contemplation (seeing beyond the face of the person or the thing, a sense of the holy, the numinous, mystery). A simple and attractive beauty in everything that is used or done in liturgy is the most effective invitation to this kind of experience. One should be able to sense something special (and nothing trivial) in everything that is seen and heard, touched and smelled, and tasted in liturgy.
**THE SACRED**

18. An important part of contemporary Church renewal is the awareness of the community's recognition of the sacred. Environment and art are to foster this awareness. Because different cultural and subcultural groups in our society may have quite different styles of artistic expression, one cannot demand any universal sacred forms.

**QUALITY AND APPROPRIATENESS**

19. This is not to say that liturgy makes no demand upon architecture, music and the other arts. To be true to itself and to protect its own integrity, liturgy must make demands. Basically, its demands are two: **quality** and **appropriateness**. Whatever the style or type, no art has a right to a place in liturgical celebration if it is not of high quality and if it is not appropriate.

20. **Quality** is perceived only by contemplation, by standing back from things and really trying to see them, trying to let them speak to the beholder. Cultural habit has conditioned the contemporary person to look at things in a more pragmatic way: “What is it worth?” “What will it do?” Contemplation sees the hand stamp of the artist, the honesty and care that went into an object's making, the pleasing form and color and texture. Quality means love and care in the making of something, honesty and genuineness with any materials used, and the artist's special gift in producing a harmonious whole, a well-crafted work. This applies to music, architecture, sculpture, painting, pottery making, furniture making, as well as to dance, mime or drama—in other words, to any art form that might be employed in the liturgical environment or action.

21. **Appropriateness** is another demand that liturgy rightfully makes upon any art that would serve its action. The work of art must be appropriate in two ways: 1) it must be capable of bearing the weight of mystery, awe, reverence, and wonder which the liturgical action expresses; 2) it must clearly serve (and not interrupt) ritual action which has its own structure, rhythm and movement.

22. The first point rules out anything trivial and self-centered, anything fake, cheap or shoddy, anything pretentious or superficial. That kind of appropriateness, obviously, is related to quality. But it demands more than quality. It demands a kind of transparency, so that we see and experience both the work of art and something beyond it.

23. The second point (to serve) refers both to the physical environment of public worship and to any art forms which might be employed as part of the liturgical action (e.g., ritual movement, gestures, audio-visuals, etc.).
THE SERVING ENVIRONMENT

24. By environment we mean the larger space in which the action of the assembly takes place. At its broadest, it is the setting of the building in its neighborhood, including outdoor spaces. More specifically it means the character of a particular space and how it affects the action of the assembly. There are elements in the environment, therefore, which contribute to the overall experience, e.g., the seating arrangement, the placement of liturgical centers of action, temporary decoration, light, acoustics, spaciousness, etc. The environment is appropriate when it is beautiful, when it is hospitable, when it clearly invites and needs an assembly of people to complete it. Furthermore, it is appropriate when it brings people close together so that they can see and hear the entire liturgical action, when it helps people feel involved and become involved. Such an environment works with the liturgy, not against it.

THE SERVICE OF THE ARTS

25. If an art form is used in liturgy it must aid and serve the action of liturgy since liturgy has its own structure, rhythm and pace: a gathering, a building up, a climax, and a descent to dismissal. It alternates between persons and groups of persons, between sound and silence, speech and song, movement and stillness, proclamation and reflection, word and action. The art form must never seem to interrupt, replace, or bring the course of liturgy to a halt. If one uses film, for example, in such a way that one seems to be saying, “We will stop the liturgy for a few moments now in order to experience this art form,” then that use is inappropriate. If, however, an art form is used to enhance, support and illumine a part or parts of the liturgical action or the whole action, it can be both appropriate and rewarding.

26. A major and continuing educational effort is required among believers in order to restore respect for competence and expertise in all the arts and a desire for their best use in public worship. This means winning back to the service of the Church professional people whose places have long since been taken by “commercial” producers, or volunteers who do not have the appropriate qualifications. Both sensitivity to the arts and willingness to budget resources for these are the conditions of progress so that quality and appropriateness can be real.
classifications. By doing this the liturgy celebrates the reign of God, and as such maintains the tension between what is (the status quo of our daily lives) and what must be (God's will for human salvation — liberation and solidarity). This uniqueness gives liturgy its key and central place in Christian life as seen from the perspective of an actual community. Just as liturgy makes its own demands on the environment and the arts, so too, does the assembly. When the assembly gathers with its own varied background, there is a commonness demanded which stems from our human condition. The commonality here seeks the best which people can bring together rather than what is compromised or less noble. For the assembly seeks its own expression in an atmosphere which is beautiful, amidst actions which probe the entire human experience. This is what is most basic and most noble. It is what the assembly seeks in order to express the heart of the Church's liturgy.

CONTEMPORARY

33. Contemporary art forms belong to the liturgical expressions of the assembly as surely as the art forms of the past. The latter are part of our common memory, our communion (which extends over time as well as over geographical boundaries). Contemporary art is our own, the work of artists of our time and place, and belongs in our

celebrations as surely as we do. If liturgy were to incorporate only the acceptable art of the past, conversion, commitment and tradition would have ceased to live. The assembly should, therefore, be equally unhesitating in searching out, patronizing and using the arts and media of past and present. Because it is symbolic communication, liturgy is more dependent on past tradition than many human activities are. Because it is the action of a contemporary assembly, it has to clothe its basically traditional structures with the living flesh and blood of our times and our arts.

BEAUTIFUL

34. Because the assembly gathers in the presence of God to celebrate his saving deeds, liturgy's climate is one of awe, mystery, wonder, reverence, thanksgiving and praise. So it cannot be satisfied with anything less than the beautiful in its environment and in all its artifacts, movements, and appeals to the senses. Admittedly difficult to define, the beautiful is related to the sense of the numinous, the holy. Where there is evidently no care for this, there is an environment basically unfriendly to mystery and awe, an environment too casual, if not careless, for the liturgical action. In a world dominated by science and technology, liturgy's quest for the beautiful is a particularly necessary contribution to full and balanced human life.
THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE

35. To gather intentionally in God's presence is to gather our total selves, our complete persons — a "living sacrifice." Other human activities tend to be more incomplete, specialized, and to claim one or the other facet of ourselves, lives, talents, roles. Liturgy is total, and therefore must be much more than a merely rational or intellectual exercise. Valid tradition reflects this attention to the whole person. In view of our culture's emphasis on reason, it is critically important for the Church to reemphasize a more total approach to the human person by opening up and developing the non-rational elements of liturgical celebration: the concerns for feelings of conversion, support, joy, repentance, trust, love, memory, movement, gesture, wonder.

SINFUL

36. The Church is a church of sinners, and the fact that God forgives, accepts and loves sinners places the liturgical assembly under a fundamental obligation to be honest and unpretentious, without deceit or affectation, in all it does. If all distinctions have been stripped away, then basic honesty has to be carried through in all the words, gestures and movements, art forms, objects, furnishings of public worship. Nothing which pretends to be other than it is has a place in celebration, whether it is a person, cup, table or sculpture.

SERVANT

37. Different ministries in such an assembly do not imply "superiority" or "inferiority." Different functions are necessary in the liturgy as they are in any human, social activity. The recognition of different gifts and talents and the ordination, institution or delegation for the different services required (priest, reader, acolyte, musician, usher, etc.) is to facilitate worship. These are services to the assembly and those who perform them are servants of God who render services to the assembly. Those who perform such ministries are indeed servants of the assembly.

38. The liturgical assembly, as presented, is Church, and as Church is servant to the world. It has a commitment to be sign, witness, and instrument of the reign of God. That commitment must be reflected and implemented not only in the individual lives of its members but also in the community's choices and in its use of its money, property and other resources. Liturgical buildings and spaces should have the same witness value. Their planning should involve representatives of oppressed and disadvantaged parts of the communities in which they are located.