

Liturgical Furnishings

The celebration of the Eucharistic liturgy and our other sacraments require a variety of furnishings and appointments. Everything we use in the liturgy must serve and not hinder the celebration. The Church regulates the particulars of our church furnishings because they are such an important component of the place where we come together to worship. All too often, we find poorly designed or crafted pieces of furniture in our sanctuaries. Over time, mismatched furnishings can collect, and older pieces begin to show wear and tear.

In the revised General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM), we read of the importance of the design of the entire space and its furnishings. “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.” (GIRM #292) The General Instruction goes on to provide specific requirements for sacred furnishings.

The Altar Table: “The altar on which the Sacrifice of the Cross is made present under sacramental signs is also the table of the Lord to which the People of God is called together to participate in the Mass, as well as the center of the thanksgiving that is accomplished through the Eucharist.” (GIRM #296) It is appropriate to have a fixed (immovable) altar table in every church. (GIRM #298) It should be freestanding, and should be the “center toward which the attention of the whole congregation of the faithful naturally” focuses during the liturgy. The altar table should be made of “natural stone” or of “wood which is worthy, solid, and well crafted.” (GIRM #301) The General Instruction also addresses requirements and recommendations for the placing of relics,

the use of an altar cloth, the use of candles, and the decoration of the altar. Great care is required in all treatments of the altar because this symbol of Christ is worthy of our reverence and respect.

The Ambo: “The dignity of the word of God requires that the church have a place that is suitable for the proclamation of the word and toward which the attention of the whole congregation of the faithful naturally turns during the Liturgy of the Word.” The ambo should be stationary and be clearly visible to the assembly. The ambo is reserved for the reading of scripture, the responsorial Psalm, the proclamation of the Exsultet at Easter, for the homily, and for the Prayer of the Faithful. (GIRM #309). Careful attention must be given to a reliable sound system that enables the congregation to hear the proclamation of the word easily.

Chair for the Priest Celebrant: The GIRM states that the chair for the priest “must signify his office of presiding over the gathering and of directing the prayer.” We are also instructed that “the best place for the chair is in a position facing the people at the head of the sanctuary.” The GIRM goes on to caution that the chair should not be placed at a great distance from the gathered assembly or in front of the tabernacle. In the design and placement of the chair, “any appearance of a throne, however, is to be avoided” (GIRM #310).

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal presents our Catholic tradition of reverence and respect for all of the liturgical furnishings in our church buildings. Whenever a parish plans to renovate or change any of its furnishings, there should be a careful review of the regulations and guidance offered by the Church, both universal and diocesan. The GIRM, the document of the United States Catholic Conference, Built of Living Stones: Art and Architecture for Worship, and the Archdiocesan Environment & Art Subcommittee are important and helpful resources.