

Environment for Catholic Worship

Part 10

Art in the Service of the Liturgy

In a former convent, surrounded by a beautiful garden in a London neighborhood, Terebinth Trust was established as a Catholic social service agency to give safe shelter and counseling to women and their children fleeing abusive situations at home. The women were often unable to speak about their situations and were suspicious of living hopefully in light of their fears and past experiences.

As one way to help them surface their deep-seated feelings, the staff encouraged the women and children to paint. The results were simple, but astoundingly profound and beautiful images. When asked to describe their meaning, the women and children were able to speak for the first time about the trauma they experienced and what the future might hold for them.

There is something powerful in worthy art that reveals truth and beauty in a way that words alone cannot capture. Art placed in a liturgical setting has the power to help a community to remember and celebrate its relationship with God, who is beyond our complete understanding or ability to contain in words.

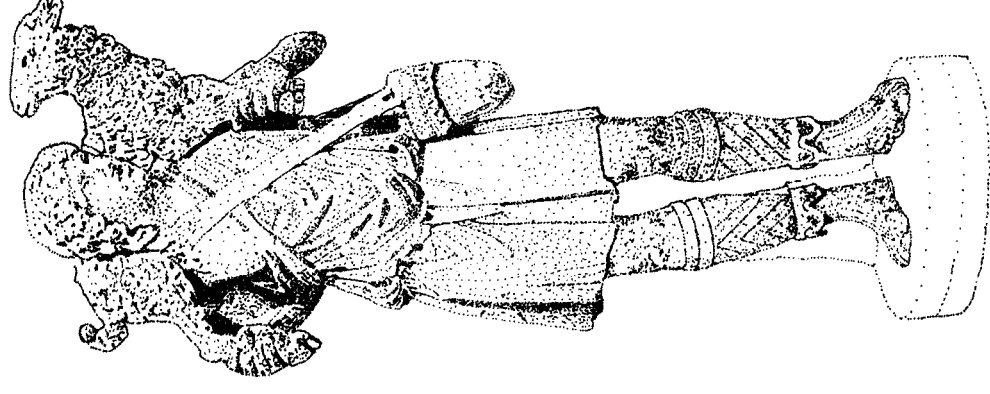
Unlike other ways in which we use art in modern life, liturgical art is not first about decoration. Images in a liturgical setting are another form of proclamation of the

message of the gospels—a visual parable—allowing us to see with new eyes. Just as the gospels call us to ongoing conversion and a change of heart, so too, images can confront our complacency and comfortable assumptions.

And unlike art that is created as a tribute to a famous person in society, worthy images of Mary and the saints can move beyond honor to give us some insight into the way in which they shared in the life and work of Christ and in the paschal mystery. We can see in these images a way in which we too might embrace Christ and become one with Christ in the Eucharist, as we are broken and poured out for those who are hungry and thirsty in our midst.

Since the liturgy is an action of Christ and the church, art in spaces for the Eucharist must foster, and never compete with, the principal symbols of the sacrificial meal and the full, active and conscious participation of all those present. The altar and the ambo will always be the most important furnishings in a space dedicated to the celebration of the Eucharist. Images and decorative elements should enhance and not detract from these central elements.

Parish communities have discovered that images can be placed in a variety of spaces throughout a church,

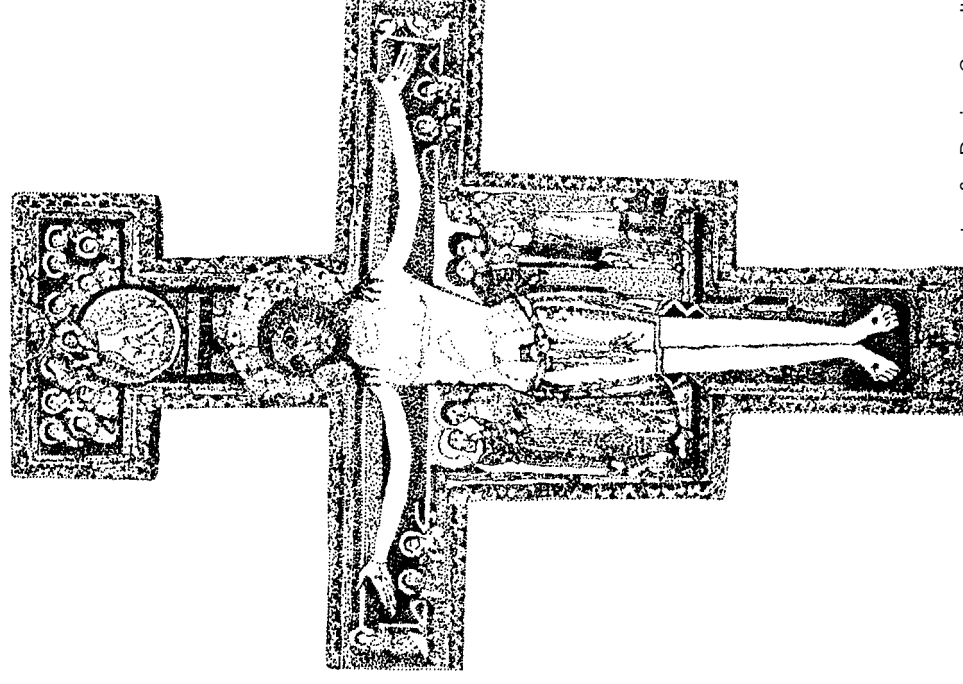


3rd century statue of the Good Shepherd

including the gathering space, devotional alcoves, chapels, meditation gardens and at the entrance.

On the walls surrounding the baptistery of a 3rd century house-church discovered in East Syria, an early Christian community painted primitive, but colorful depictions of stories from the old and new testaments to help them celebrate and remember what baptism means for the newly initiated and for the community. Images included Adam and Eve, the Samaritan woman at the well, the healing of the paralyzed man, St Peter's attempt to walk on the water and the three women who found the tomb empty. Also included was an image of the Good Shepherd, with a ram on his shoulders and a flock of sheep at his side.

Today, parish communities continue the long tradition of commissioning artists who create art that is truly beautiful and that communicates the weight of the mysteries that we celebrate. These images will not be trivial, but should, over time, unfold the truths that are revealed in the scriptures and the life of the living church.



11th century San Damiano Cross, Italy

Excerpts from Built of Living Stones

Reflecting the awareness of the Communion of Saints, the practice of incorporating symbols of the Trinity, images of Christ, the Blessed Mother, the angels, and the saints into the design of a church creates a source of devotion and prayer for a parish community and should be part of the design of the church. (BB 1258) Images can be found in stained glass windows, on wall frescos and murals, and as statues and icons. Often these images depict scenes from the bible or from the lives of the saints and can be a source of instruction and catechesis as well as devotion. Since the Eucharist unites the Body

of Christ, including those who are not physically present, the use of images in the church reminds us that we are joined to all who have gone before us, as well as to those who now surround us. [135]

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 (SC 125) 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. [137]

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