

word on worship

SOUND SYSTEMS IN CHURCHES

"Faith Comes Thru Hearing" - Romans 10:17

Sound reinforcement design for worship spaces remains plagued by many wrong assumptions and improper evaluation of priorities even in the 1980's era of high technology. This article will present an overview of the basic needs of sound reinforcement in the Roman Catholic worship space.

First, here are sound system solutions now available using modern technology.

- System designs can create the image that the sound actually comes from the mouth of the person speaking.
 - Sound quality can be natural and pleasant in any worship space.
 - Loudspeakers can be very small and easy to hide in a room free of echo disturbance.
 - Loudspeakers can be located in a single, central location to allow those persons with hearing impairments to hear properly with no special equipment.
 - New microphones designs allow the preacher to move around in the pulpit with no changes in the level or quality of the sound. At the same time these microphones are almost impossible to see from the nave of the church.
 - Automated signal processing removes the need to ever adjust the system. Soft spoken people can be heard, loud people will not be annoying, howling feedback is controlled, and most important, there are no controls for anyone to misadjust.
 - System designs can last for more than thirty years with no or minimal maintenance.
- Good wireless microphones allow full freedom of movement with natural and undisturbed sound performance.
 - Music can be amplified with the proper energy necessary for good congregational leadership. Amplification is natural and not obvious.
 - Diffuser systems can change a room filled with echo disturbance to a reverberant room with balanced sound good for music and spoken word.
 - Loudspeakers can be placed in remote locations with no need for expensive wiring.
 - In summary, the technology is available to provide clear natural sound in any worship space.

Let us examine the most common requests and assumptions connected with the sound system purchase decision.

"We need some extra loudspeakers in the rear of the church."

This statement is often the opening line when a new system is requested. Adding more loudspeakers to an already inadequate system seldom reduces complaints from the congregation. Loudspeakers in every corner of the church do not produce adequate sound clarity. Sound must appear to come from the mouth of the person speaking to maintain listener attention. This requires a single source of reinforced sound. A single source of sound also reduces echo disturbance and allows those with hearing impairments to hear properly.

"How much wattage does the amplifier have?"

The power available from the amplifier should never be used as a criteria to determine the quality of a sound

system. The power needed for a proper system is totally a function of the system design and the efficiency of the loudspeakers. A properly designed system will have adequate power.

"How big will the loudspeakers be?"

Small loudspeakers in the 1990's can produce sound quality far superior to many large loudspeaker systems. Large loudspeakers are necessary in a church only when the reverberation in the room disturbs the clarity of the spoken word. Large loudspeakers as a solution for echo disturbance allow the sound to be directed only where it is needed. The size of a loudspeaker with strong directional control is dictated by physics. The length of a sound wave in the voice range can exceed four feet. In a space with serious echo disturbance the most common, reasonable solution is large horns in a single point configuration.

"We want flat microphones on the altar, ambo and lectern."

Greater than twenty companies manufacture boundary type microphones that use the pressure part of the sound wave as the activating force. These microphones have a very low profile but are not the complete answer for all areas of a worship space. Boundary (flat) microphones require a flat surface area normally exceeding the available surface area of an ambo or lectern. If the proper boundary area is not available to the microphone, the resulting sound is not natural and the ability to amplify soft speaking lectors is reduced. The best solution for proper voice quality is to keep the microphone in front of the person speaking. Miniature microphones make this possible with minimum visibility.

"We must make certain that the church renovation will make the church more live to create better music."

There seems to be a trend to create echo chambers out of new and renovated churches with the intent of creating a better environment for music. Reverberation increases the power and fullness of liturgical music. However, improper reverberation creates harshness, does not allow the singers in a choir to hear themselves, and reduces the quality of music in the space. Reverberation and spoken word are compatible. The reverberation may even have a long decay time. The

important criteria is the control of the reverberation. The sound field created by the natural acoustics of the room must be balanced or the clarity of voice and music will be destroyed. The decay of this sound field must be balanced and controlled by properly designed diffusion in the room. The creation of a good musical space is difficult. Concert halls are not echo chambers. Consider the controversy surrounding the renovation of Carnegie Hall. Close to thirty acoustical consultants were called in to minimize even tiny variations in an already good music hall. Do not assume that echo is better. No concert hall is an echo chamber.

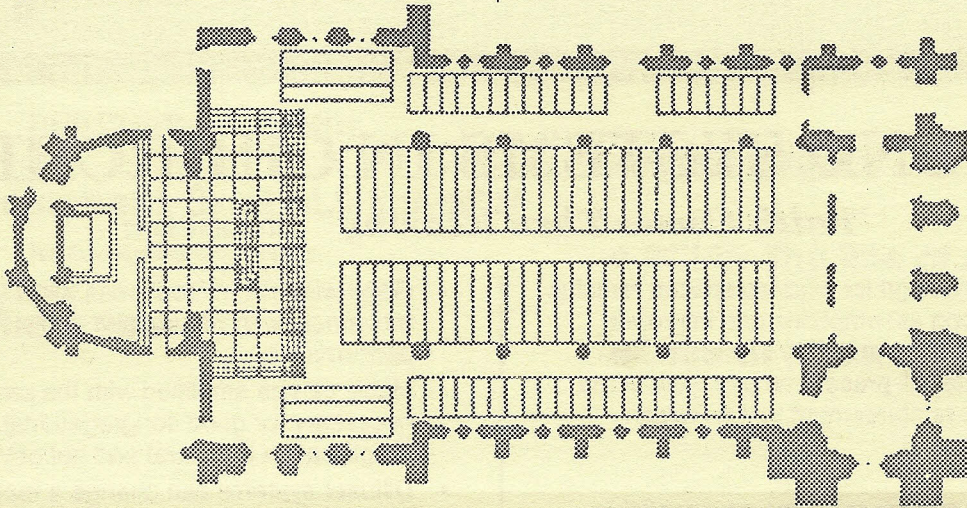
"A nearby parish has wireless microphones and has constant interference trouble."

The most recent designs of wireless microphones eliminate interference problems as long as the transmitter is powered. Wireless microphones have acquired a bad reputation from the

large number of inexpensive citizens band and industrial band wireless microphones on the market. These units are easily purchased but have little interference immunity. In addition, the microphone elements are very poor causing distortion and a great tendency for howling. Good VHF wireless units work on unused television channels. The FCC keeps these channels free from unwanted interference. It is important with any good wireless to change the batteries at a regular interval. Trying to get an extra hour from a battery that tests low may result in popping noises and distortion as the battery dies.

"We don't want large loudspeakers on the ceiling"

A single, central source of sound on the ceiling of a church is most often the best solution for a system in a worship space. The single source of sound creates the image that the speech is coming from the mouth of the lector. This helps people keep their attention on the spoken word. A lesson can be taken from classical theater designs. If a stage play does not keep the audience's attention on the faces of the actors, the reviews will be bad and the show will close. All theaters keep the sound image forward. Large loudspeakers are necessary only when the room has echo disturbance characteristics. If the space is small or the reverberation gentle, miniature speakers will provide very pleasant results.



"We only need a new amplifier."

If the amplifier still works but the people cannot hear, a new amplifier and replacement loudspeakers may only slightly improve the system design. Before replacing existing equipment have the system properly adjusted. This may make the same improvements as keeping the same design and replacing the equipment. Substantial improvements generally require a new approach to the design and some positive effort.

Here are eleven simple guidelines that will make a sound reinforcement system work in any church.

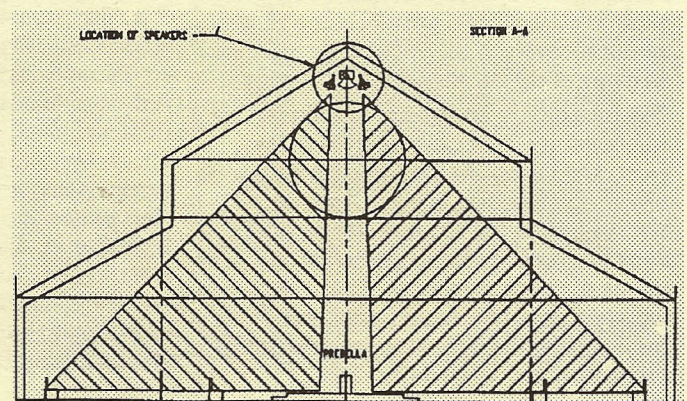
1. Keep the microphones in front of the person speaking. Miniature microphones will minimize the visual affect.
2. Keep the loudspeaker placement to a single location. Distributed speaker systems should only be used if a single location is impossible.
3. Automate the system. Few churches have personnel capable of properly adjusting the system. The signal processing available in automated systems can adjust the volume as people speak, control the quality of the voice and stop howling feedback.
4. Louder is not better. Reinforced sound should be natural and comfortable.
5. Select professional equipment tried and tested in broadcast and theater applications. Reviewers and experienced technical people will allow only the best to survive. No theater of broadcast operation wants microphones to be visible or loudspeakers disturbing the visual impact of the set. Quality is also of greatest importance.
6. If the amount of echo disturbance in your church is too great to allow the use of miniature loudspeakers, hidden from view, a large horn array may be necessary to allow the people to hear properly. Do not overreact to how this equipment will look. If people have not been able to hear, despite multiple attempts to repair the system, any objections to the look of the equipment will stop after the liturgy begins and they hear for the first time.
7. Home stereo dealers, music stores, industrial paging companies, telephone installers, ham radio operators, and electricians may not have the proper skills to design a sound system in a worship space, especially a large space. The design and implementation requires an understanding of many small details that can be easily overlooked. If your church has had several systems and the congregation is still complaining, select an engineering company with a well trained staff that understands liturgical as well as performing arts. Check their educational backgrounds as well as

their track record.

8. Do not rule out acoustical modifications during church renovations. Sound absorbers are not necessarily the answer, however. Choir directors and organ builders do not want a dead room. Diffusing surfaces bridge the gap between intelligible spoken word and exciting music. Listen to the sound of a good classical music hall. They are properly diffused while remaining reverberant.
9. Do not ignore the music ministry. This group has special needs that vary from one service to another. Good congregational singing depends on the proper amount of musical leadership.
10. Make certain that all wiring connections are solid. Microphone connectors should be solidly mounted and follow National Association of Broadcaster's Standards. If connectors must be mounted in the floor, they should be arranged such that dirt and cleaning chemicals cannot enter them. Wire splices should be minimized. If splices are necessary, wires should not be twisted together with wire nuts or tape covering them. Only approved compression terminals (crimp lugs) or connectors should be used. Microphone and loudspeaker wiring should never be included in the same conduit as electrical mains wiring. If a microphone must be powered, do not allow battery type power sources. Good microphones are powered via the microphone cable.
11. Use wireless microphones for baptismal areas, weddings and liturgies with children. Placing microphone connectors at every location you might use a microphone increases the system cost well beyond the price of a good wireless microphone.

Sound system design in houses of worship is, by far, more difficult than picking an amplifier and loudspeakers. Broadcast, theater and recording industries have created new technologies that, when properly applied in a worship space, can make any church work both for spoken word and choral music.

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Sacrament, Symbol and Salvation: An Ecological Reflection

(Editor's note: Anyone who has taught liturgy/sacraments recognizes the difficulty attached to the teaching of symbol. Often those who celebrate confront the same situation from a different perspective. Our symbols do not speak as clearly as they once did. The problem is multi-faceted as are the possible "solutions". Sr. Miriam Therese, O.P. offers one approach to this complex problem.)

This article comes out of a long study and reflection on the work of Thomas Berry, Passionist priest, president of the American Teilhard Association, and author of a recent book published by the Sierra Club: *The Dream of the Earth*. His voice is one of the most prophetic in the North American Church. His images, language and perceptions are the substance of my reflection.

The context of this article is the recovery of nature for the recovery of word and worship, symbol and sacrament. This recovery is especially difficult in the present human situation. Confronted on all sides with the signs of collapse and dysfunction, the deep cultural and religious energies of the past can often appear inadequate. Whether or not it is healthy to do so, we have been coping and adapting to the dangers and distortions inherent in our failing culture. We simply go on. Whether enduring the ancient afflictions of famine and war, or shoring up a collapsing economy, we go on. And we gather around timeless rituals of worship, expressing the deepest yearnings of our spiritual depths. And now, ever so slowly, we are awakening to our own participation in the closing down of the major life systems of our planet: its air and water, its soils and natural life forms.

To be people of faith in this moment of cruel awakening will call for the most profound transformation that western peoples have ever experienced. And in order to evoke divine presence or energy for our recovery, it will demand a recovery of nature itself.

This reflection is an attempt to suggest that humanity, especially peoples of the West, and especially the Christian and Jewish communities of North America, must re-instate the *Book of Nature*, the *Book of Creation* as a fundamental source of divine revelation. The suppression of this *sacred scripture*, in preference to the biblical scripture is both a distortion and an infidelity. This

recovery may be essential to the survival of life as well as to the survival of the biblical texts themselves.

We must grasp the realization that all our images of the divine, all our sentiments toward the holy, toward mystery, have evolved over the long, emerging history of human consciousness. We have articulated such sublime images of God, because our human existence takes place in the splendor of the planet earth. Only in such a setting, amidst the magnificence of its teeming life expression, could we have evoked such a sense of God. Only in such a garden planet could we have written our inspired scriptures.

It is important to emphasize this because, in spite of our religious tradition, in spite of its deep moral sensitivity, its ethical ideals and its powerful archetypal symbols and rituals, our culture continues, day after day to extinguish, destroy, degrade and discard the very natural world which is the primary source of its divine inspiration. It is the natural world, with its infinite variety of forms, its countless communities of species, which reflect the splendor, the luminosity, the marvelous integrity which have evoked praise, awe, wonder and delight in the human heart. And so we have named and celebrated the Divine as "healer," "shepherd," "potter," "lover," as rock, as mountain, as living water, as lawgiver and life-giver, as faithful and enduring, as majestic and tender, as mother and father. Because these very qualities are embodied in the earth itself, we can abstract their essence for describing something of the Divine. If water did not exist, the qualities of cleansing, or refreshing, of quenching or thirsting, of purifying and renewing would not exist. Neither would those precious connections to the Divine.

It is critical to deal with this because, in spite of our religious commitment, we American Catholics, American Jews, American Moslems, American Protestants and Hindus, are almost obsessively, mindlessly, numbly extinguishing from the earth the possibilities of continuing to reveal the Divine. This essential scripture of water, of air, of soil and of life forms is also the primary "seamless fabric of life". It is being ripped apart thread by thread and we worshiping communities are nearly

paralyzed in our ability to even grasp what is happening.

So we gather in our places of worship and use dimmed vestiges of earthly elements. We bless fire (sometimes flickering, electric facsimiles), we bless water (bottled, if available), we bless oil (polyunsaturated), and make "sacramentals". At the same time, in our homes and workplaces we are closing down the possibility for worship to continue.

That this is happening is awesome. It was never before even in the realm of possibility. For our grandparents this was beyond conceiving. For our children it is devastating.

This is very difficult, very dark. And yet, out of the very dark there has arisen another fresh new star. A new icon, a holy revelation which is only now dimly lighting the obscurity of our awakening. This grace, this revelation can provide a vision, an energy, a healing and a recovery if we can discern that this is as much "holy revelation" as any of the "revelations" pronounced as authentic in our past.

This revelation, like most others, carries the element of surprise. Like most others it comes from unexpected sources, in the least expected ways, through unexpected visions and utterances. It has come from astronauts and cosmonauts, from astrophysicists and quantum theorists, from deepsea explorers and deep ecologists. It has come through observation and empirical data, rather than faith or intuition. It is neither exclusive nor violating of them—just different. But still revelation, for it connects us to the divine in new and wondrous bindings, shedding light where it could not be shed before.

It is summed up, so to speak, in a revelatory new image, the face of the earth photographed from the distance of the moon. This image ties together the myriad fragments of specialized, compartmentalized information pursued so relentlessly over the past several centuries driven by a perception of the earth as a vast complex machine, the western soul gave birth to the industrial/technological experience. And as it broke open and explored its parts and numbered its components, it finally arrived at a dimension unexpected—that every part was tied into a whole that was

itself alive! Now expressed as "the gaia hypothesis", this perspective views the earth itself as a living organism (*Gaia* is the ancient Greek name for the Earth Mother). It is as if the image of the earth from space dissolved every last fragment of western belief that only humanity was truly alive, the center of everything, the norm of every value. Rather than humanity living on an earth that was a mere physical object, we are stunned by the realization that the earth is the subject that is alive, and that humanity is one of its expressions.

If this is so—if the earth is alive and is breathing and regenerating and nourishing and healing and governing herself in and through the countless life forms through which she lives—than our species, humanity, can be identified as the species in whom she is now capable of thought, of self-awareness, of judgment, of choice, of sentiment, yes, even of worship.

For our part this demands a radical re-defining of our human "self" to include the earth as our own deep "self". For if the earth is our self, than the *whole* earth, all its atomic elements, all its genetic complexity, the integral community of all its life forms are our self, it is the *whole* that lives. It becomes increasingly clear that the human will live or die as the earth lives or dies. The very functions of life—respiration, digestion, circulation, regeneration—are all functions of the earth itself. We are totally and utterly dependent on the whole. If the forests and oceans die there is no possibility for human survival.

It is critical for the religious communities of North America to grapple with this. For the emphasis of our faith and sacraments have been overly ordered to redeeming us out of the world. We have seen the cyclical patterns of decay and death as an imperfection of the natural world, visited upon it by a fall from a state of former perfection. Rather than grasping death as the inherent order of the universe and of life, we came to see the universe as flawed—a basically flawed material plane exempted from spirit, a backdrop on which humans worked out their spiritual deliverance from it.

In this perspective, there is little spiritual energy available for addressing the magnitude of our ecological crisis. Even our deepest ethical values for a compassionate liberation of the poor, for sharing the abundant "resources" of the earth becomes impossible for the natural world. Without a recovery of its deep sacralization, we will continue to consume it with the highest motives at heart. Our deepest social ethics demand that the goods and resources of the ship of life be shared justly among all the passengers. But they do not yet address the issue of the ship itself. This is still perceived as a physical, material thing in which or on which the drama of justice and peace is worked out and salvation attained.

But there is no ship, no thing. There is only the whole, living self, the whole body of the planet, the whole community of its living expression and every jot and tittle of the created revelation, the created scripture. Without the earth there is no human, and without the human there is no conscious participation in the evolution of its spiritual potential.

And this finally is the heart of the issue, the timeless yearning of the human heart to walk the great inner journey into God.

The evolution of our inner self, the realization and activation of its communion with the Divine and with the

whole of the universe is the great journey. We are prompted on every level to unfold the infinite capacity for truth and love. This is the heart and soul of our word and worship. This is the essence of all religion, to bind together, *religere*. To bind the human and divine within the context of existence, within that deep capacity for communion with the whole.

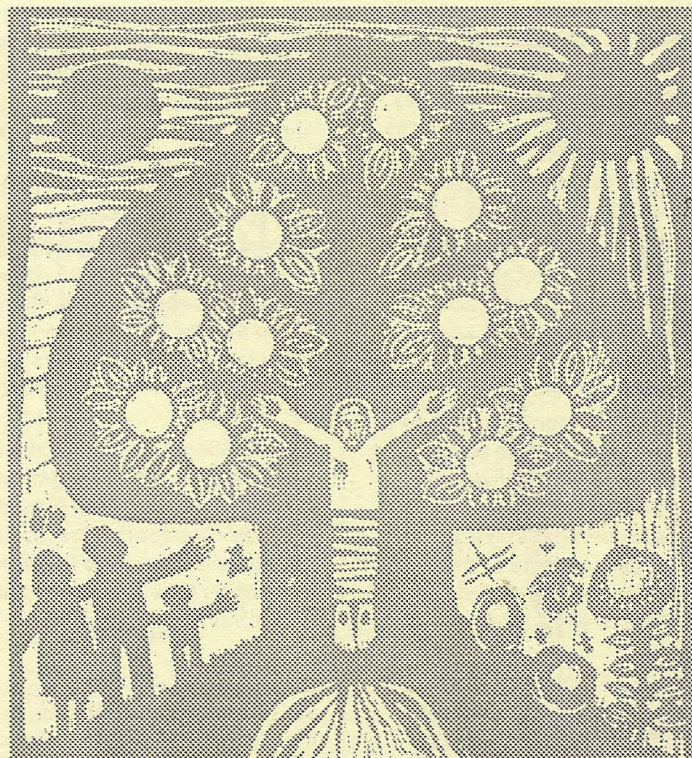
All this is what Christ realized and activated. And the earth, living, breathing, thinking, knowing, creating, choosing, loving in him, has never been the same. The consciousness of Christ has broken through, changed everything, and made it possible for humanity to grasp and activate the same wondrous unity with the divine and all creation.

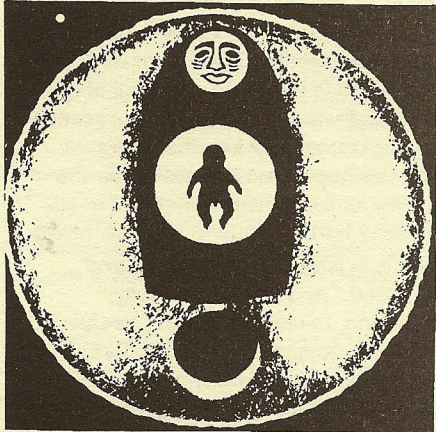
What is needed in our time is for Christians to break out of the illusion of our separateness from creation. We must dissolve the perceptions of our boundaries, and extend the law of Christ's love to include the whole self, not just its human expression. In fact, it is doubtful we will ever overcome our racial and religious and sexual antagonisms unless we heal our prior alienation from the natural world. That is the great alienation and the one which fuels the magnitude of our frenzy to devour, conquer or dominate it.

The point of all this is that our religious symbols must reconnect us. We must

recover the sense of the sacred in every earth form. We must cease our striving to be redeemed out of the world and unveil the sacramental forms which will empower us to redeem our dying world through our own spiritual development. If we do not cease our antagonism toward nature, toward wilderness, toward life as it is, not as we would prefer it, there is little hope for any salvation.

For those called to create the liturgical forms of word and worship, this implies a profound awakening. There must be no compromise in the integrity of images and symbols. Do not sing about God "satisfying hearts with gifts of finest wheat" unless you use the finest wheat. I think when liturgists and celebrants actually search for finest wheat and come up





against the difficulty of even obtaining it, there may be a change in our present destructive American agriculture. Worship, liturgy should empower the community to be guardians of the integrity of the soil, of the process of cultivation, of the commercial venture whereby humans share in the miracle of wheat. Wheat sown in exhausted, mined, chemically drugged soil,

contaminated with poisons has no right appearing on the table of life. Better we give our children stones.

If we cannot participate in guarding our local treasure of groundwater, of decrying the injustices and degradation visited on it, then we should not obscure or deny it by importing bottled water. And if our tap water is incapable of reflecting the divine, then let us grieve and mourn over that, and let us repent of that, and let us recover its health by the holy act of naming the source of the sacrilege. Water *is* holy. Perhaps it is our very blessings on it that absolve us from concern about what was unblest. We must recover our water.

One last reflection is rooted in the sense of restoring art. We humans must be nurtured by beauty. Art is such a wellspring of hope and vision and recovery. The timeless, inexhaustible beauty of the elements need quiet, empty spaces in which to shine. We must strip away the clutter, especially the trite, the

distracting, the slovenly. We must bring in the fire, the earth, the water, the breath in its simplicity, its integral functioning, its veiling of the Divine. Using sound and image help us to see that these sacred elements have carried revelation through the whole journey of earth time, in an unceasing movement of creation from stardust to oceans, from crystallized mineral to living soils, from the flight of birds to the brilliance of dahlias, from the golden wheat to the bones of children and from the dance of God to the dance we repeat.

Thomas Berry repeats over and over again that the proper role of the human in the universe is to celebrate. That is the essence of worship. May we finally comprehend the universe as total liturgy.

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??? What's Rite ???

Why has the Advent wreath been moved from a prominent place in the sanctuary and why have we stopped lighting the wreath as part of the Penitential Rite during Advent?

Vatican II encouraged us to explore and become more familiar with the richness of our Judeo-Christian heritage and traditions. Liturgy planners began reintroducing some signs, symbols and traditions to enrich and enhance our spirituality and our celebration of Church seasons. Many such customs had been lost to our everyday life. The Advent wreath is one non-liturgical seasonal sign introduced within the Sunday Mass where it was thought more people could benefit from it. Understanding that intrinsic eucharistic signs and symbols should not be overshadowed at eucharistic celebrations, liturgists sought appropriate places to incorporate other meaningful signs. Frequently, the environment was used or, as mentioned in the question, the Gathering Rite or the Penitential Rite was adapted to integrate them.

As we continue to study and grow in understanding Vatican II guidelines and recommendations, we realize there are better ways to incorporate these symbols. Over twenty-five years, many have come to believe that an Advent wreath would best be viewed as part of the seasonal environment in our worship space. This may also include using the vestibule or gathering space if that space allows for proper placement and visibility. The candles are lighted—one more each week—before Mass begins and without pomp or ritual.

Authentic, natural signs should not need explanation but through repetitious use have an impact on our hearts and minds. The unending circle of evergreens, glowing more brightly each week, reflect our endless hope and increasing

joy in the presence of Jesus, the Light of the world. The change in one candle's color makes us attentive to the change in readings from reflective preparation for the second coming of Christ to joyful preparation for celebrating His incarnation and birth.

We need to keep in mind that whatever we place in the sanctuary—an Advent wreath, the Christmas creche, etc.—should not distract us nor detract from the primary focus on word and sacrament. Moving the wreath does not diminish its importance. We would do well to continue efforts to encourage use of such seasonal symbols and traditions outside Sunday mass. Homilists and catechists can encourage their use in the home, at parish meetings or in classrooms. Parishes can plan Advent wreath-making workshops, sell Advent wreaths, recommend prayers and reflection booklets to accompany the use of the wreath. Thus, the wreath can be more than just a part of the environment; it becomes a challenge for the family or other community members to take time to reflect and share with each other how they are waiting and preparing for the coming of our Savior.

The traditional Christmas wreath can also take on deeper significance. When we gather around the table with family and friends to celebrate the Christmas season—at home, at church or in the classroom—the same wreath used for Advent can be our centerpiece. Now festively decorated, it demonstrates that the waiting time is over; it is now time to celebrate the presence of our Savior in our midst.

Recommended: *Catholic Household Blessings and Prayers* contains a variety of blessings for the season, including ones for the Advent wreath, the Christmas tree, the Christmas creche, and the house. Such blessings provide an excellent opportunity for the family to instill the richness of prayer during this special season.

UPDATE: Future Liturgy Workshops

The Worship Office of the Archdiocese will be sponsoring liturgy workshops on various topics in 1990. So mark your calendars today!

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St. Matthews Church
March 15 - Livingston
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General Instruction of the Roman Missal

March 20 - Ridgefield
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Music in Catholic Worship & Liturgical Music Today

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March 29 - Livingston
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April 3 - Ridgefield
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Lenten Day of Recollection for Liturgical Ministers

March 24
St. Andrews, Westwood

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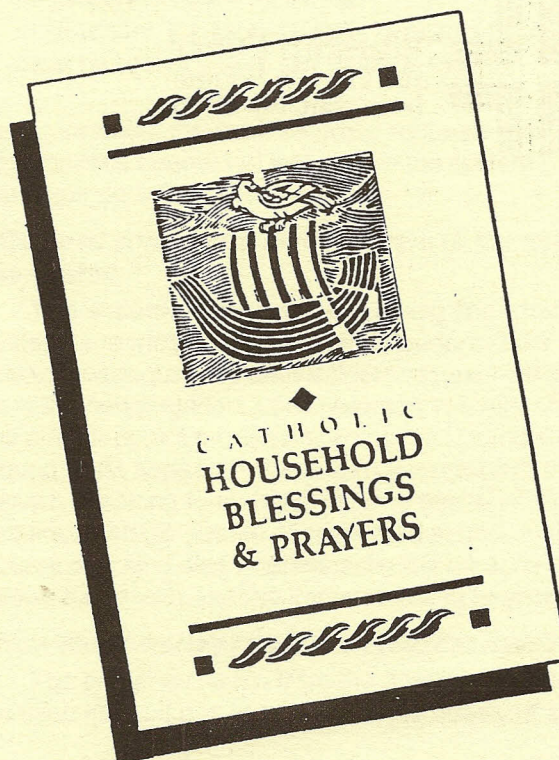
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