

Marriage

Through the many years of meeting with engaged couples, brides, and their mothers, I have come to understand that we are functioning in the midst of conflicting metaphors. The bride comes to the parish with visions implanted by magazines and movies that describe her “perfect day” while, at the church, we schedule that introductory meeting with the catechetical idea of sacrament and how this individual is continuing a spiritual journey that began with baptism, Eucharist, and confirmation. We want the couple to celebrate their connection to God and the community, and we want to design a liturgy that celebrates the history and theology of our faith. Understanding the fundamental conflict of these metaphors is the beginning of enabling a dialogue where we can discuss the appropriate and significant ways to decorate the church on this great celebratory day.

Everything hinges on the initial moment when the engaged couple walks in the door of the parish office. In this meeting, it is vital to extend enthusiasm for their story and attentiveness in listening to their dreams for the wedding. I always hand them a copy of Paul Covino’s excellent *Celebrating Marriage* (ocp.org/30106208). However, in this day of Twitter, Instagram, and Pinterest, handing a young couple a 135-page workbook is akin to inviting them to view prehistoric cave paintings. I start by using the book as a bridge to verbally define the sacrament of matrimony and how the sacrament is connected and interdependent upon the sacraments of initiation. Once that foundation is verbally established it becomes possible for me to describe the appropriate use of symbol and ritual as we celebrate modern marriage in the Church.

At this juncture, I pull a volume of photographs that visually present ways in which our particular church environment can be decorated appropriately and respectfully. This initial conversation is crucial to accomplishing the ultimate goals of hospitality, evangelization, and celebration.

I encourage the couple to consider the two main aspects of the liturgy—word and table—and how any floral decoration, candles, or textiles should enhance and not obscure these two profound architectural elements. We consider appropriate decoration of the baptismal font, paschal candle, and entry vestibule where guests will be arriving. We study the floor plan of the worship space and the choreography of the wedding as well as how certain elements, while charming, could create awkwardness in the necessary movement. To merely recite these details in this age of the visual learner is courting misunderstanding; having specific visual images on hand is the beginning of enabling the Church’s metaphor of wedding to become more comprehensible.

First Eucharist and Confirmation

Many years ago I heard a story about a neighboring parish celebrating first Eucharist with an elaborately planned Presentation and Preparation of the Gifts. All of the first communicants were to select a symbol of gratitude from their lives, and these objects were to be processed up to the sanctuary and placed around the altar in a pleasing tableau. When the day came, there were baseball mitts, pompoms, soccer balls, teddy bears... I could go on, but you get the picture. As the procession came to an end, the presider rose to receive the essential gifts of bread and wine, but those elements were unprepared in the flurry of organizing the parade of objects.

Such stories reinforce my assertion that we are muddying the metaphor of celebrating the sacraments of initiation. Increasingly, I am witnessing first Eucharist and confirmation celebrations decorated in the style of commencement ceremonies. But for confirmation and first Eucharist it is necessary to reinforce our ongoing connection to baptism, Eucharist, and the Word of God.

Consider highlighting the altar, ambo, paschal candle, and font with simply arranged seasonal flowers, church lighting, and fabric. My favorite first Eucharist adornment involves the designing of banners. Each year our catechists invite the young students to create an imaginative banner depicting their life with God. Children naturally gravitate to dynamic hues and, once completed, the first Eucharist banners are hung about the church on the day of the liturgy. If suspended effectively, the small banner shapes create a kaleidoscope of brilliant color throughout the church. I always leave the banners for a couple of weeks and invite the parishioners to study them, for they often reveal remarkable insights into the spiritual lives of our children.

When celebrating confirmation, continue to strengthen the environmental emphasis on those significant church elements by adding a dignified stand in the sanctuary for the Chrism vessel. If possible, direct your church lighting in such a way to emphasize the sacred oil.

In Closing

If possible, resist the urge to diffuse and distract from the primary symbols of table, ambo, candle, and font. On these celebratory days when we gather to be nourished, joined, sealed, and transformed, strive to enhance and reinforce those places in your church that clearly indicate the great ongoing story of our sacramental life with the God who lives among us.

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