St. Michael the Archangel Catholic Church

LITURGICAL ENVIRONMENT MINISTRY GUIDE
Saint Michael the Archangel Catholic Church Liturgical Environment Ministry is dedicated to serve the parish in preparing an atmosphere for worship that will invite the community to raise their hearts and minds to God in full, conscious, and active participation. The goal of this ministry is to care for all the elements of worship ensuring that the liturgical environment is appropriate, authentic, beautiful, and accessible.

The Liturgical Environment Team is responsible for decorating the church and chapel to reflect both the liturgical season and the scriptural readings for the season. Creativity is key for the success of this ministry. Those interested in participating in this ministry should have an interest in art, crafts, painting, sewing, arranging and caring for plants/flowers, and an eye for beauty.

Liturgical Environment is focused on the preparation of a space for worship. The decorated space should invite all parishioners to enter into the sacred beauty of the Mass while reflecting the theology of the liturgical season. In short, the liturgical environment should elevate the community’s prayer and worship. Pope Francis wrote in *Evangelii Gaudium*: “The Church evangelizes and is herself evangelized by beauty in the liturgy.”

“This world in which we live needs beauty in order not to sink into despair. Beauty, like truth, brings joy to the human heart, and is that precious fruit which resists the erosion of time, which unites generations and enables them to be one in admiration. And all this through the work of your hands… Remember that you are the custodians of beauty in the world.” –Pope Paul VI from his “Address to Artists upon the Closing of the Second Vatican Council,” 8 December 1965.

**General Information about the Church**

The church is a place for the People of God to come together to offer worship to God and to receive His grace in the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. When we enter a church, we should immediately sense that it is “different” than other places, that it is sacred, a place for prayer, where our whole being is oriented to God. “Indeed, the nature and beauty of the place and all its furnishings should foster devotion and express visually the holiness of the mysteries celebrated there” (*General Instructions of the Roman Missal* 294).

While the whole church is a space set apart from ordinary life, the various places within the church have different functions and levels of sacredness. The following are the four major areas of the church: the Narthex, the Nave, the Sanctuary, and the Sacristy.

**The Narthex**

The narthex is the area directly inside the front doors of the church before one enters into the main body of the church itself. It is a transitional space from the secular to the sacred. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states: “When we enter the house of God, we must
cross a threshold, which symbolizes passing from the world wounded by sin to the world of the new Life to which all men are called” (CCC1186). The narthex represents this threshold. It is a transitional space where we mentally prepare to leave behind all the cares and anxieties of ordinary life in order to be refreshed and filled with God’s life and love.

The narthex is where we welcome people into the church; it should be inviting and well-kept, never dingy or cluttered. It is the place for informational items and/or displays which do not directly relate to prayer or sacred worship. The narthex is a good place for flags, banners, displays, and sacred art. It is important that the narthex have its own simple beauty which begins to orient our hearts toward God.

The Nave

The nave is the main body of the church where the congregation sits. The primary purpose of the nave is to provide a worship space for the faithful to pray and to actively participate in the Mass. It should also be a place that “invites us to the recollection and silent prayer that extend and internalize the great prayer of the Eucharist” (CCC1185). The nave should have a noble simplicity that is entirely free of clutter and distraction.

The Sanctuary

The sanctuary is the most sacred place in the church where the altar, ambo (lectern), presider’s chair, and tabernacle are placed. The sanctuary should be a visible reflection of heaven and the heavenly liturgy; it should be the most beautiful space in the church, where our eyes are attracted. Of all the places in the church, it must be decorated with the greatest dignity and beauty, which corresponds to its significance for our faith.

The Sacristy

The sacristy is the room where the priest gets ready and preparations are made for Mass. This area must be neat at all times. It is important to think of the practical aspects of preparing for Mass when arranging items in the sacristy.
The Liturgical Year

The liturgical year serves as the Catholic Liturgical Calendar. It consists of the cycle of liturgical seasons that determine when feast days and other holy days are observed, and which Scripture and Gospel readings are used at Mass. Aside from the readings, the liturgical calendar also determines the interior decoration of a church, the priest's vestment colors, and the timing of spiritual seasons. The liturgical year begins on the first Sunday of Advent. It is divided into the following six seasons:

- **Advent** – The four week period of preparation before the celebration of Jesus' birth. The Advent season is a time of waiting and preparing for the coming of Jesus. This refers both to the anniversary celebration of the Incarnation and the Second Coming of Christ.

- **Christmas** – The season celebrating the Nativity of Jesus Christ.

- **Lent** - A six-week period of penance before Easter. Lent is a penitential season that recalls the 40 days Jesus spent in the desert and the 40 years that the Israelites wandered in the desert on their journey to the Promised Land.

- **Triduum** - The holiest "three days" of the Church's year, where the faithful recall the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

- **Easter** – The 50-day period of joyful celebration of the Lord's resurrection.

- **Ordinary Time** – This season is divided into two sections (one span begins after the Christmas season until Lent and the other begins after the Easter season) wherein the faithful consider the fullness of Jesus' teachings and works among his people.

The mystery of Christ, unfolded through the liturgical year, calls us to live his mystery in our own lives. This call is best illustrated in the lives of Mary and the saints, celebrated by the Church throughout the year. There is no tension between the mystery of Christ and the celebration of the saints, but rather a marvelous harmony. The Blessed Virgin Mary is joined by an inseparable bond to the saving work of her Son. The feasts of all the saints proclaim the wonderful works of Christ in his servants and offer the faithful fitting examples for their imitation. In the feasts of Mary and of the saints, the Paschal Mystery of Christ is proclaimed and renewed.

The following are some important feast days throughout the liturgical year:

- **Mary, Mother of God**  
  January 1
- **Ash Wednesday**  
  Date changes from year-to-year
- **Divine Mercy Sunday**  
  Second Sunday of Easter
- **Ascension**  
  Seventh Sunday of Easter
- **Pentecost**  
  Date changes from year-to-year
Trinity Sunday   First Sunday following Pentecost
Corpus Christi Second Sunday following Pentecost
Sacred Heart of Jesus Date changes from year-to-year
Saints Peter and Paul June 29
Assumption of Mary August 15
St. Michael the Archangel September 29
All Saints November 1
All Souls November 2
Christ the King Date changes from year-to-year
Immaculate Conception December 8
Our Lady of Guadalupe December 12

Liturgical Colors

The liturgical year dictates both the Scripture Readings and the Liturgical Colors of the day. There are five liturgical colors. Each liturgical color reflects a certain meaning.

1. **Purple**: This color is used during the seasons of Advent and Lent. Purple represents a spirit of Penance.

2. **Red**: This color is used during Passion Sunday (*Palm Sunday*), Good Friday, Pentecost, and feasts of martyrs. It can also be used for the celebration of the Sacrament of Confirmation. The color red represents a spirit of sacrifice and the burning love of God.

3. **Rose**: This color is used on the Third Sunday of Advent and on the Fourth Sunday of Lent. Rose represents a spirit of anticipation.

4. **Green**: This color is used throughout Ordinary Time. Green represents a spirit of hope, life, and growth.

5. **White/Gold**: This color is used during the seasons of Christmas and Easter. It is also used for feasts of the Blessed Virgin Mary, angels, and saints who were not martyred.
The Catholic Liturgical Year

The Liturgical year begins on the first Sunday of Advent. It is divided into six seasons. The shortest but most holy season is the three-day Sacred Pascal Triduum leading up to Easter.

First Sunday of Advent
December 8
Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary

Advent
December 12
Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe

December 25
Christmas Day

1st Sunday after Jan. 1
Epiphany

Christmastime

Baptism of Our Lord
Sunday after Epiphany

Evening of Holy Thursday to evening of Easter Sunday
Sacred Pascal Triduum

Passion Sunday
1 week before Easter

Good Friday

Lent
Ash Wednesday
Lenten Fridays

Easter Sunday

Holy Week

Usually 40 Days after Easter
Ascension of the Lord

Transfiguration of the Lord
August 6

All Saints Day
November 1

Christ the King
Sunday

50 Days after Easter
Pentecost

First Sunday after Pentecost
Holy Trinity

August 15
Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary

November 2
All Souls Day
Decorating Points

**General**
The altar should be the clear focal point where everyone’s attention is naturally drawn therefore decorations should be simple and beautiful.

At least two candles are required for any Mass; however, four or six are appropriate for Sunday Masses.

The tabernacle should be treated with the utmost reverence and surrounded with beauty; it should be worthily decorated. The tabernacle is one of the things that most clearly identifies a Catholic church, as Catholics are the only Christians to adore the reserved Eucharistic species outside of Mass.

The sanctuary lamp should always be burning near the tabernacle. It is sometimes customary to have a number of larger candles near the tabernacle. Flowers may also be placed near the tabernacle.

Flowers and plants may be set near the ambo to highlight its significance.

The liturgical color for Marian feasts is white; however, blue accents may be used.

Focus on liturgical themes rather than secular ones.

Always keep in mind that the sanctuary is a reflection of heaven. Because of this, beauty, loveliness, sacredness, and grandeur must always be the rule. Anything lacking quality or evoking the secular must be avoided.

Flowers and plants must be real; no artificial plants and flowers are to be used.

Banners may be used; however, they are most effective when they do not have words.

Less is more.

**Advent**
Decoration of the church during Advent should use the colors violet and rose; any semblance of Christmas colors (*red, green, and gold*) should be avoided.

The advent wreath may be displayed in the narthex or in the sanctuary. However, it should be visible to the congregation without interfering with the celebration of the liturgy, nor should it obscure the altar, the ambo, or the presider’s chair.

Flowers are permitted during Advent, but only in moderation. The character of Advent is one of waiting and expectation for the full joy of Christmas and decoration should express this concept.
**Christmas**
The Nativity set may be placed either in the front of the nave or in the sanctuary. It may be set up in advance of Christmas (*beginning on or after December 17*), but the baby Jesus should not be placed in the crib until the first Christmas Mass is celebrated.

Poinsettias are the traditional plant of the Christmas season. Gold, red, green, and white are the traditional Christmas colors used to decorate. The atmosphere should be very festive.

Christmas trees can be used in the sanctuary. They should not obscure the altar, ambo, presider’s chair, or tabernacle. The trees should not be decorated with blinking or flashing lights. No ornaments are to be used on the Christmas trees.

Elegance, beauty, and glory are the keywords when decorating for the Christmas season.

**Lent**
The liturgical color of the Lenten season is violet (*purple*).

It is forbidden to use flowers during Lent, except on Laetare Sunday (*the Fourth Sunday of Lent*) and on solemnities.

Any live plants should be removed from the sanctuary and nave. Cacti may be used during Lent to emphasize the desert journey.

It is appropriate to use violet or black fabric to give a sense of the season.

It is not appropriate to remove the holy water from the fonts during Lent. Lent is a time specifically to recall our baptism and holy water is a special sign of baptism.

Beginning on the Fifth Sunday of Lent, the Church has a tradition of covering sacred images and crosses with violet cloth. However, this tradition is not a requirement.

On Passion Sunday (*Palm Sunday*), red cloth may be used in place of violet cloth. Arrangements of palm branches may be placed in the sanctuary, but flowers are not to be used. After Mass, the red cloth and palms should be removed from the sanctuary and the penitential violet color returned for the first three days of Holy Week.

**Holy Thursday**
The season of Lent ends with the Mass of the Lord’s Supper on Holy Thursday evening. All violet cloth used to decorate during Lent must be removed before this Mass.

The altar of repose, to which the Eucharist is transferred at the end of Mass, should be beautifully decorated with white or gold cloth, many candles, and flowers. When the time of solemn adoration ends, the candles are extinguished and the flowers and other decorations removed. All other decorations in the sanctuary or nave are to be removed.

After the Mass of the Lord’s Supper, the altar is stripped of the altar cloth, candles, and crucifix. The altar is left bare.
Holy water is removed from all holy water fonts immediately after the Mass of the Lord’s Supper.

After the time of solemn adoration, no candles should be lit anywhere in the church, including at votive shrines.

**Good Friday**
The character of this day is one of mourning and penance. The church environment is stark and bare. The altar is bare and the ambo should have no ornamentation.

The crucifix for veneration during the Liturgy of the Lord’s Passion should be of appropriate size and beauty. Only one cross should be used for the Veneration of the Cross.

After the veneration, the cross is placed in the center of the sanctuary in front of the altar, propped in such a way that it is visible to the people. This cross is the visual focal point of the celebration so no other decoration in the church should detract attention from it.

**Easter Season**
The liturgical color for the Easter season is white/gold.

The liturgical environment should be the most lavish with a concentration on elegance and beauty. No secular decorations (*bunnies or pastel eggs*) are to be used.

The Paschal (*Easter*) Candle represents Christ who is the Light of the World. Therefore, the Paschal Candle remains in the sanctuary near the ambo for the entire Easter season. It is appropriate to surround the Paschal Candle with flowers.

The typical flowers used during the Easter season are: Easter lilies, peace lilies, hydrangeas, chrysanthemums, tulips, and daisies.

Once the flowers from the Easter Vigil are no longer in bloom, additional flowers should be added so that the sanctuary continues to have the festive joy of Easter for the entire fifty days.

**First Holy Communion**
The image of the host and chalice, bread and wine, wheat, and the Victorious Lamb are appropriate to use in the decoration scheme.

The décor for First Communion must always be elegant, solemn, and beautiful. Surrounding the ceremony with noble beauty will help children to grasp the dignity and importance of the Sacrament of the Eucharist.

If the children make their own decorations, then they should be displayed in the nave or narthex of the church and not in the sanctuary.
Decorating Styles

There are two basic styles of decorating: symmetric and asymmetric. The illustration below is a good visual example of the difference between the two styles.

**Symmetry**
Symmetrical decorating or balance occurs when you have two identical sides of a design with a central point of axis -- so if you cut the design in half, the left and right are mirror images of each other. To be considered perfectly symmetrical, a design needs to have equally weighted visuals on either side. Symmetrical design allows you to draw attention to all areas of an image equally. Since this form of design is usually very structured and rigid in nature, it’s referred to as formal balance.

A good example of symmetry in nature is the butterfly; its right and left sides are highly similar to each other (although not identical). We find perfect symmetry when two mirrored sides are exactly the same. Fortunately, symmetrical design does not depend on identical mirroring. It’s only important to get close to the effect; exactitude is not necessary. Remember, you can manipulate the user’s eye easily without worrying about geometric perfection as a consideration in your design.

Symmetry works best when:
1. You are seeking a more serious aesthetic (you want to convey classicism).
2. You want to achieve more order and structure.
3. You don’t want to put a lot of thought into the arrangement of elements, but still want to achieve a balance (symmetrical layouts are inherently stable and balanced).

**Asymmetry**
Asymmetrical decorating or balance occurs when you have different visual images on either side of a design, and yet the image still seems balanced. To be considered asymmetrical, a design needs to have unequal visual weight on either side, but those unequal visuals need to balance each other. Asymmetry is the absence of symmetry of any kind. Whenever we make a design that consists of elements that we’ve distributed unevenly around a central point or axis, we’ll consequently have an asymmetrical design.
We can exploit asymmetry, using it to draw attention to areas in the design or to convey dynamism or movement.

Asymmetrical designs can evoke feelings of movement and seem more modern than symmetrical designs, but it can be more difficult and less straightforward to create relationships between the design’s individual elements. It’s important to note asymmetrical balance is still strategic -- placing shapes haphazardly around a space won’t create a compelling composition. To create a successful asymmetrical design, you still need to figure out how to balance out all of the various elements.

Asymmetry works the best when:

1. You want design to be less stable, predictable, and harmonized since asymmetrical layout tends to be more interesting and dynamic.

2. You are willing to spend extra time arranging elements to find unique ways of achieving balance.

3. You are seeking a more playful design layout.

**Combine symmetry and asymmetry in design**
Symmetry is not always an either/or decision. It is possible to create the most interesting and aesthetically pleasing designs by combining symmetry and asymmetry. You can break the layout into smaller sections and try to achieve a symmetrical or asymmetrical balance in each section. For example, you can have a symmetrical layout in which asymmetry is used to create points of interest and organize visual hierarchy within a group of similar elements.

**Flower and Plant Care**

It is a part of good stewardship to care for the flowers and plants that are used to decorate the church. Throughout most of the liturgical year, our florist provides a floral arrangement for the front of the main altar. After the weekend Masses, the floral arrangement is moved to the front of the chapel altar. These floral arrangements do not need to be watered; however, some minor adjustments (such as removal or trimming of wilted or dying flowers) may be needed during the week to get the most use out of the arrangement. Once a floral arrangement no longer reflects a sense of beauty or reverence, then it needs to be removed and discarded.

Sometimes during the week funerals are celebrated and the family allows the church to keep floral arrangements. If this is the case, the arrangements may be used in front of the altar, by the ambo, or on the carpeted ledges under the Divine Mercy and Our Lady of Guadalupe images. During the seasons of Advent, Christmas, and Lent, please refrain from using the funeral arrangements in any liturgical worship spaces.
During the season of Easter, a spray can be used to put a shine of the leaves of plants. This is allowed and encouraged because it adds to the beauty and reverence of the worship space.

**Poinsettia Care**
1. Poinsettias need a minimum of six hours of bright (but not direct) sunlight each day.

2. These plants prefer temperatures from 65 to 70 degrees Fahrenheit during the day with a drop from 60 to 65 degrees at night. The lower night temperatures help the poinsettias keep their brilliant color. Never let the plant be exposed to temperatures less than 55 degrees Fahrenheit.

3. Poinsettias like moist, but not wet, soil. When the top of the soil becomes dry, add room temperature water to the plant. Allow the water to drain through the pot when watering, and then discard any excess water in the saucer. If the plant's container was wrapped with decorative foil, be sure to remove the foil from the bottom of the container to allow water to drain through the plant.

4. Overwatering the poinsettia and letting it sit in excess water are common mistakes that will kill the plant. If your poinsettia begins to wilt, too much or too little water could be the culprit. If the plant feels dry, add water immediately. If the container feels heavy and the soil is wet, allow the poinsettia to dry out before watering it again.

**Cactus Care**
1. Succulents and cacti are low maintenance, water wise plants that store water in their leaves, stems or roots, creating a plump or succulent appearance. They are often found in hot, arid climates such as the desert and have adapted to tolerate long periods of drought.

2. Watering: If your container has drainage holes, water thoroughly once a week. If your container does not have drainage holes, water sparingly to moisten soil but be sure water does not pool up at the bottom of container which can cause rotting. Allow soil to dry between waterings.

3. Place plant in an area with bright, indirect light.

**Easter Lily Care**
1. Easter lilies prefer a cool daytime temperature of 60° to 65° F and nighttime temperatures 5 degrees cooler. To keep the flowers from wilting, avoid placing the potted plant in direct sunlight. Most plants will lean toward the sunlight. To keep the plant growing upright, turn the pot every two days.

2. Keep the plant moist, but not soggy. Most Easter lilies are sold commercially in pots covered with decorative foil jackets. No water should be left standing at the
bottom of this covering or the life of the lily will be ruined. Remove the pot from the foil covering every time the plant is watered. Once the water has soaked into the soil, return the pot to the foil covering.

3. To help your potted lily thrive, do not place the pot near a direct source of heat. Lilies thrive in a humid climate, more so than a dry one.

**Peace Lily Care**

1. Keep the soil moist, but do not overwater. Peace lilies can tolerate short periods of dry soil, but their leaves will start to brown if neglected for too long.

2. Peace lilies enjoy high humidity. Misting their leaves can help to increase humidity.

3. Peace lilies are a tropical plant, so keep them in temperatures above 60°F and away from cold, drafty windows. They do best in temperatures upwards of 70°F.

4. Keep these plants out of direct afternoon sunlight, but in a well-lit area.

**PEACE LILY PROBLEM SOLVER**

**Problem:** Peace lily doesn't bloom.
**Cause:** The plant has insufficient light.
**Solution:** Move it into a brighter location.

**Problem:** Deep green leaves develop brown tips and edges.
**Cause:** You've let the soil get too dry.
**Solution:** Maintain evenly moist soil.

**Problem:** The plant suddenly collapses when the soil is moist.
**Cause:** Overwatering and poor drainage are to blame.
**Solution:** Empty the saucer beneath the pot, and let the soil drain.

**Problem:** Plant collapses when soil is dry.
**Cause:** Wilt is due to lack of water.
**Solution:** Water plant thoroughly.

**Hydrangea Care**

1. Check the soil moisture daily.

2. Hydrangeas require more water than other plants because of their large blooms, so thoroughly watering potted plants is highly important.

**Chrysanthemum Care**

1. Chrysanthemums require more frequent watering due to their shallow roots, especially in high heat.

2. Be sure not to overwater them.
3. Chrysanthemums do best in shady areas.

**Tulip Care**
1. Water tulips with 2 inches of water a week to maintain consistent soil moisture.
2. Keep them in full light for six to eight hours a day.

**Daisy Care**
1. Daisies require partial shade.
2. Water daisies when the top 2 inches of the potting soil gets dry.

**Fern Care**
1. Ferns don’t do well in full sun, and too much direct light can cause the plant to wither, and as a result, you see the scorched leaves. They can survive in all day long, bright indirect sunlight.
2. Not all ferns are tropical, but the majority of them are. Most of the fern varieties people grow indoors require a warm temperature for optimum growth. The ideal temperature for the ferns to reside in is 70 F.
3. An important fern plant care lesson is to keep the soil moist. If you’re growing fern indoors in low light or a cold climate, water your fern only when the soil is slightly dry to touch.
4. When it comes to how to care for ferns, the light pruning is required. You can trim dead and damaged fronds any time of the year, except winters in a cold climate. Remove diseased or pest-infested parts whenever you see them.

**During the seasons of Christmas, Lent, and Easter, the head of the Liturgical Environment Committee will provide a schedule for the watering of the flowers and plants.** This will provide the best care for the liturgical environment and make us good stewards of the gifts that are given to the Church.

**Final Thoughts**

The key to creating liturgical environments is simplicity while making sure the following focal points are highlighted: the altar, the ambo, and the presider’s chair. Decorations should “draw people to the true nature of the mystery being celebrated rather than being ends in themselves” (taken from USCCB’s document “Built of Living Stones”). When it comes to the liturgical environment, the best guidelines are: Appropriateness, Quality, and Noble Simplicity with Elegance.