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DECORATING SACRED SPACES

1 Here's the delivery, faithful reader, on my promise of last month to address the matter of decorating sacred spaces.

2 First, a qualification: The term "sacred spaces" can mislead. Any space can be sacred – not just church buildings or Greek temples.

3 What makes a space a sacred space, you ask? My answer: When there's evidence of loving care and thoughtful, creative attention lavished upon it. I have described a Caribbean gin mill as a sacred space elsewhere in this series (See [Essays 77](#) and [153](#)); a hotel lobby-atrium. Does the space give evidence of its designers having "honoured the molecules?" See [Essay 75](#).

4 I'm basically arguing here, as in those earlier Essays, that we pay attention to the Incarnation, to the Sacramental character of all life, according to the Christian valuation of things. See *Philippians* 4:8. As my examples in [Essays 75](#) and [77](#) mean to suggest, you can find that respect, that loving attention, that "honouring of the molecules" in other sensibilities than Christian, of course. That's why I'd list the Athenian Parthenon, Sydney Australia's Opera House, and Atlanta's Hyatt Regency Hotel among my favourite "sacred spaces." (And yes, I've stood, gaping open mouthed in awe, in all three.)

5 OK. That's out of the way. You may not agree, but I encourage you to give my argument some thought. Now, on to decorating those sacred spaces. I see three principles, when we're speaking of Christian worship spaces:

6 Honour the Church Year. This principle is probably first and foremost. I've reported elsewhere in this series my disappointment in noting a lovely banner, pains-takingly prepared for use in a church on Reformation Day, that featured the Luther Rose – on a fabric field of baby blue. Baby blue, dear friend, is not the church year colour for Reformation: blood red is. That baby blue simply ruined the experience for me.

7 Banners are a splendid and usually inexpensive way to enliven and ennoble a worship space, particularly if they're actually carried in procession. See [Essay 157](#) for actual photos. But beware: Design them with the constraints of the Church Year

Calendar firmly in mind. The Church Year Calendar is a major gift of the catholic churches to the ecumenical treasury. Other denominations these days are claiming those treasures too, well beyond those church bodies you'd think of as historically catholic. All to the good. But be sensitive to the teaching opportunity the Calendar provides, and don't frustrate that opportunity.

8 Be sensitive also to the traditions that surround each of the Church's Seasons. An Advent wreath in Advent. Evergreens at Christmas. And no flowers at all, please, during Lent: only greens, like lemon leaves or ivys: "a fast for the eyes." Palms on Palm Sunday. And of course no decoration, no colour, of any kind, not paraments nor candles nor cross, on Good Friday. Instead we carry in procession a rough hewn wooden cross, the focus of our devotion today.

9 I've worshipped, for example, in a parish where the embellishing of the worship space was in the hands of a professional florist, who was himself scrupulously sensitive to these Church Year traditions. On Ash Wednesday, he provided neither flowers nor greens to decorate the chancel, but rather dried branches and twigs artfully arranged in an enormous vase. The effect on that Day was magical!

10 Greens for the remainder of Lent. Then flowers at Easter: a riotous explosion of colour that cried out "He is risen!" A better sermon, perhaps, than you could preach!

11 Honour the Four Irreplaceable, Indispensable Architectural Signs in Christian Worship: Font, Table, Ambo, and Sedilia. That would be a second principle I'd want to maintain.

12 I've cited before in this space the example of a worship space where the Font was used as a flower bowl on Easter Sunday! Sure, flowers in the baptistery are a great idea, especially on festival occasions. But be certain to honour the integrity of the Font as a place of washing.

13 Place flowers and other decorative elements in places that do not obscure the purpose and function of those Four Irreplaceable Signs. Be certain that access to those Four Irreplaceables is never impeded. The Font should always be filled with water, and its access unobstructed, so that worshippers may approach and dip fingers into its waters to sign themselves with the cross.

14 The Table should always be unencumbered and access to it unobstructed. It is to be honoured as the place of the Meal, even during Matins or Vespers or other non-Eucharistic services.

15 Candles can be signs of honour and respect when used with discretion and informed sensitivity. Elsewhere among these postings ([Essay 51](#)) I propose a system of using candles that attempts to honour and to illustrate what I have called Ritual Clarity ([Essay 5](#)). A Pascal Candle at the Font honours Baptism. Candles at the Ambo honour the Word: "Word lights." Candles at, or on, the Table honour the Meal: "Mass lights." Candles on a retable or elsewhere in the chancel are what I call "Prayer lights;" When lit

they are meant to proclaim: “Hey, we’re worshipping here during these moments.”

16 Honour Rites, Roles, and Rubrics. Here’s a third and final principle, derived from the principle of Ritual Clarity I propose in [Essay 5](#). The idea is simple and self-evident, as follows:

17 Honouring rites suggests that events, and seasons, and Days of greater significance require greater ritual embellishment than more ordinary days or seasons or events. Holy Communion for example needs more honour, more ritual and decorative embellishment, than Suffrages. I leave it to you to work out other implications of that principle.

18 Honouring roles suggests that we remain sensitive to the varied ministries assumed during Christian worship, The people themselves, the assembly itself: they assume the chief and indispensable ministry in worship. Worship leaders, President, Assistants, Acolytes, Choir, are all prompters to the peoples’ praise. For our decor to suggest otherwise would constitute a betrayal of the Priesthood of All Believers.

19 Honouring rubrics suggests that those charged with decorating the worship space familiarize themselves with the rubrics for a given service, and make plans accordingly. Rubrics are those “stage directions” for worship printed in red in most service books. Rubrics in *Lutheran Book of Worship* are clearer and more specific than those in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. I’d consult *LBW* for specific rubrical advice, referring also to those helpful paragraphs in *ELWorship* that lay out an overall “Pattern for Worship.”

20 Where do I get all this stuff? I had a splendid teacher of liturgy during my days at Seminary who was largely unappreciated there, by students and by other faculty. He never published. But I took copious notes and remain indebted to him.

21 His wisdom and sensitivity are behind 95% of what you read here. (Mistakes in these postings are of course my own.) I dedicate all of these postings to his memory. Here’s to you, George Rise Seltzer!

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