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Know Your Rites: How Fourteen Parishes Made Mass Improvements

Kathleen A. Cahalan

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, kcahalan@csbsju.edu

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Recommended Citation

Cahalan, Kathleen A. "Know Your Rites: How Fourteen Parishes Made Mass Improvements." *U.S. Catholic* (January 1991): 20-25.

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Know your rites: how fourteen parishes made Mass improvements

"During Easter we hung banners throughout the church," says one priest. "Someone asked me if we were having a mall opening. I said, 'No, but we are celebrating a tomb opening.'"

Kathleen A. Cahalan

"What can we do to make our liturgy better?" "How can we get more people involved?" "Do you have any ideas for what we can do for Christmas this year?" "Mass is so boring for kids—mine just hate to go on Sundays!"

What does the average Catholic parish do on Sunday to make the liturgy more interesting for the congregation? I decided to ask parishes that question, but how could I find them? Most dioceses in the country have a worship office or a liturgical commission. I thought I could just call these offices and find out which parishes have good liturgies. Unfortunately, I didn't always find the help I was looking for. "Worthington, Ohio! What in the world are you calling here for to ask about liturgy!" "We don't do liturgy real well in our diocese—maybe you should call someone else." "We haven't changed our liturgy at all. It's just not a priority in this diocese."

But, besides those few who didn't have anything to offer, I found many dioceses in the country that could help. From North Dakota to Alabama and from California to Delaware, in

small, medium, and large congregations, in rural communities and large cities, one can find Catholic churches that have worked at improving their Sunday liturgies.

What do these congregations do to deepen and enrich the worship experience in their parishes? What kind of practices have they introduced that have made their worship come alive?

Worth a thousand words

Symbols are an expression of the fundamental beliefs of our faith and a means of encountering God. Most churches are full of symbols: crosses, statues, paintings, Stations, candles, vestments, banners. These symbols show many dimensions of Christianity and tell the stories of its tradition.

"The liturgy should focus on the basic Christian symbols. They speak louder than anything we can come up with ourselves," says Father Ron Raab, C.S.C., associate pastor of St. Elizabeth Church in Portland, Oregon.

"I find that breaking open the symbols we use is very im-



portant to how people experience the liturgy," says Father Michael Kavanaugh of St. James Church in Savannah, Georgia. "For example, our Advent wreath was too small, so I took large bolts of cloth in the Advent colors and hung four banners from the ceiling to the floor in the sanctuary. Then I put a candle in front of each banner. This really opened up the symbol.

"Don't minimize the symbols," Kavanaugh advises; "use them as fully as you can. We just dedicated a new church, and in the procession from the old church to the new church we placed incense in a large terra-cotta bowl. The whole area was filled with the wonderful fragrance. It was very dramatic and beautiful; but if you ever do this, it is wise to turn off the fire alarm during the ceremony."

Father Peter Crynes, pastor of Corpus Christi Church in Montdale, Pennsylvania, says, "I think the focus of the liturgy should be on the presence of God. I want the attention of the community on that. One thing I've done to enhance this is to work with candles. We have two candles lighted during the Liturgy of the Word next to the pulpit. These are the only two candles lighted during that part of the Mass. When it is over, the eucharistic ministers come forward, extinguish these two, and light the candles at the altar. They then set the table for the Eucharist. There is a sense of concentrating on God's presence in this place now."

Many Catholics remember when the altar was moved to the front of the sanctuary after the Second Vatican Council. Moving furniture can cause confusion if the reason is not explained. But oftentimes moving the lector's stand or the presider's chair to a more prominent place invites people to

consider the purpose of that person's role in the Mass.

Placing other church furnishings in prominent roles can also bring new life to a liturgy. For example, not only is the baptismal font a reminder of Baptism; it serves as a basin for water, one of the primary symbols of Christianity.

"We installed a large baptismal font in the front of the church, and it has made Baptisms more significant," says Father Richard Becker, rector of Sacred Heart Cathedral in Pueblo, Colorado. "It also serves as the holy-water font for those entering the church at that point. There is constant, flowing water in the font, so one encounters real living water. Whenever we do water sprinkling, we start there."

Ss. Peter and Paul Church in Hamburg, New York installed a baptismal pool as part of a renovation, and it is the focus of many of their rituals. The marble baptismal pool was placed at the entrance of the church, and Baptism by immersion takes place every Sunday afternoon.

"We incorporate the pool into everything," says the pastor, Father Robert Hora. "Even during funeral rites, we begin by placing the body next to the pool. I always remind the family and friends that Baptism is the real death for the Christian, not bodily death. We bless the body with water from the pool and then continue to the sanctuary."

Hora has used the new baptismal font to highlight other symbols in the church. "I believe that the symbols we use should be seen and should be abundant," he says. A six-foot Paschal candle stands beside the baptismal pool, and sacred oils—encased in crystal and labeled—are displayed prominently at the entrance of the church. "I don't just dot the babies'

heads with chrism," Hora emphasizes, "I dump it on. And I don't just sprinkle the congregation with water. I really soak them, and they love it. We think people should leave here refreshed from their experience."

Get the message

Of course, not every parish has the means to renovate or add new furnishings. But many parishes I spoke with had a liturgy team—some with only a handful of people; others with ten to twenty parishioners. The goal of any liturgy-planning committee is to bring the presence of God and the message of the Word to the congregation, through whatever medium it chooses to use.

"A liturgy committee doesn't just write the Prayers of the Faithful and pick the songs," says Jane Bernard, director of liturgy for St. Joseph on the Brandywine Church in Wilmington, Delaware. "Our committee focuses on the readings for the day and asks, 'How can we translate this message into everything we do? How can the musicians, readers, and presiders express this message?'"

"Preparation is one of the most important things," says Raab of St. Elizabeth Church in Portland, Oregon. "I find it very useful to reflect on the Gospel in small groups beforehand, as in the RCIA model. The RCIA model is a source of renewal for the whole church. Why not have groups in the parish meet during the week and reflect on the Sunday Gospel together? Liturgy isn't the only time we seek God during the week. If we don't come to liturgy prepared, it shows in our celebration, how the readings are read, and how the congregation responds."

Many teams find ways for the whole

congregation to be involved in the worship service. Many parishes have lay eucharistic ministers, lectors, cantors, ushers, and greeters. Some parishes have creatively involved parishioners; however, sometimes they overlook children and adolescents. To incorporate younger parishioners in the Sunday liturgy, Spirit of Life Church in Mandan, North Dakota invites its youth group to plan and participate in one liturgy a month. St. Joseph Church in Mobridge, South Dakota enlists young people as greeters and makes them the center of the liturgy a few times during the year.

Not every congregation can have a large liturgy team; but liturgical experts agree that anyone in the parish should be invited to participate, no matter what his or her expertise.

At Resurrection Church in Santa Rosa, California, the liturgy team meets at 5:30 a.m. once a week because of busy schedules. They invite the eucharistic ministers and readers for that week to participate in the planning. The Cathedral of St. Catharine of Siena in Allentown, Pennsylvania believes in full participation. "We have one member who is a shut-in," says Mary Ann Hammer, head of the liturgy committee. "We keep in touch by phone, and once a year we have a meeting at Holy Family Manor, where she lives. We work hard on formation, and during the year we have an enrichment evening where we invite a speaker. This year we had it at the care facility so she could be there. We also have a high-school student on the team."

By planning around one theme, a liturgy team can keep the message simple yet strong. At Resurrection Church, the liturgy team works at expressing themes both orally and visually. Larry Caroline, the director

of music and liturgy, explains, "We have a parish with a lot of young families with children; so we cannot have really long, elaborate ceremonies. We try to do one simple thing in a Mass and highlight it visually and in song and prayer. On Epiphany we took the message 'Spread the news to all the people' and incorporated it by asking people of different professions to dress in their professional garb and read a prayer of petition in relation to their area of work. We had firemen, policemen, nurses, a student, a lawyer. You could both hear and see the message."

It's a family affair

Another way to get more people involved is to invite whole families to participate in the worship service. St. Joseph Church in Crescent Springs, Kentucky has a special family Mass on Pentecost. "One family brings up the gifts and another prepares the altar table. We also had a procession of twelve banners made just of ribbons, which families brought in at the beginning. It was a very long, impressive procession because there was about 20 to 30 feet between the banners and the breeze from the open windows was moving the ribbons. It was very beautiful," says Father Mark Keene, associate pastor.

On Corpus Christi and Holy Thursday, Keene says that his parish also encourages family participation by using baked bread for the Eucharist: "Because it is difficult to break it all up during the Lamb of God, we usually have a family member of the eucharistic minister hold the basket of bread while the minister breaks a piece off during the distribution of Communion."

Hospitality is another way many

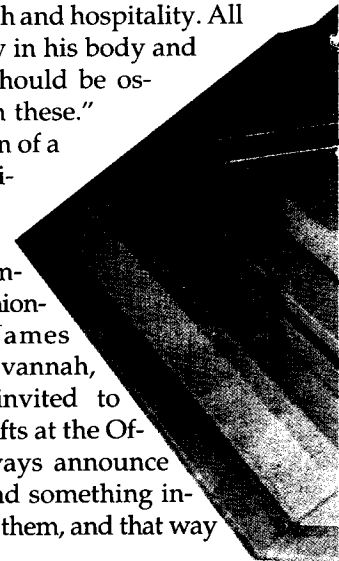
parishes seek to improve their liturgies. Hospitality begins with how people approach each other and what they understand themselves to be doing in the Mass.

How eucharistic ministers distribute Communion is a good example. "It can become very rote, but the eucharistic ministers need to concentrate on the mystery of Christ present to them. They should, with some intention, look into the recipients' eyes and see the mystery of God," says Raab.

"I try to be aware of how my actions reflect my awareness of God's presence," says Crynes of Corpus Christi Church in Montdale, Pennsylvania. "While I'm sitting in the chair listening to the readings, I turn my whole body toward the reader—I don't just sit there looking around and slouching over. Deliberate gestures are critical to the atmosphere of the liturgy."

"The presence of the presider is the key," says Father Edward Mazzu, associate pastor of St. Francis of Assisi Church in Orange, Texas. "He has to be a good communicator, have good eye contact, have a good voice and sense of warmth and hospitality. All this must show in his body and gestures. He should be ostentatious with these."

Another sign of a church's hospitality is how it greets strangers or newcomers. New parishioners at St. James Church in Savannah, Georgia are invited to carry up the gifts at the Offertory. "I always announce their names and something interesting about them, and that way



people will see them and be more likely to greet them afterward," says Kavanaugh.

"On major holidays or Holy Days of Obligation," says Mazzu, "I like to invite the congregation to turn to their neighbors and introduce themselves. There is a wonderful sense of freedom in the assembly; and then when we begin with the sign of the cross, there's an uproarious response. I notice, too, that there is more gusto to responses during the Mass. I don't do this every Sunday because it can become too ordinary, but on major holidays I think it is very helpful."

Hospitality can even extend to the neighborhood and to those outside the congregation that pass by the church. St. Francis of Assisi Church is at the intersection of three roads, and during the major seasons it hangs

outdoor banners announcing the season to the neighborhood. "They are artistic and very simple," says Mazzu. "For example, during Easter they said 'Alleluia' and had a silhouette of an Easter lily. People said that they reminded them each day of the season we were in."

At Resurrection Church in Santa Rosa, California, Palm Sunday is celebrated with the Presbyterian church across the street. The celebration extends afterward to families joining together for breakfast. "We bless the palms at their church and then process to ours for the Liturgy of the Word," says Caroline. "This year we had one family from our church sign up with one family from theirs, and they met afterward for breakfast."

Hospitality is also demonstrated in the awareness of ethnic diversity in the congregation. On Epiphany, the Cathedral of St. Catharine of Siena in Allentown, Pennsylvania highlights this di-

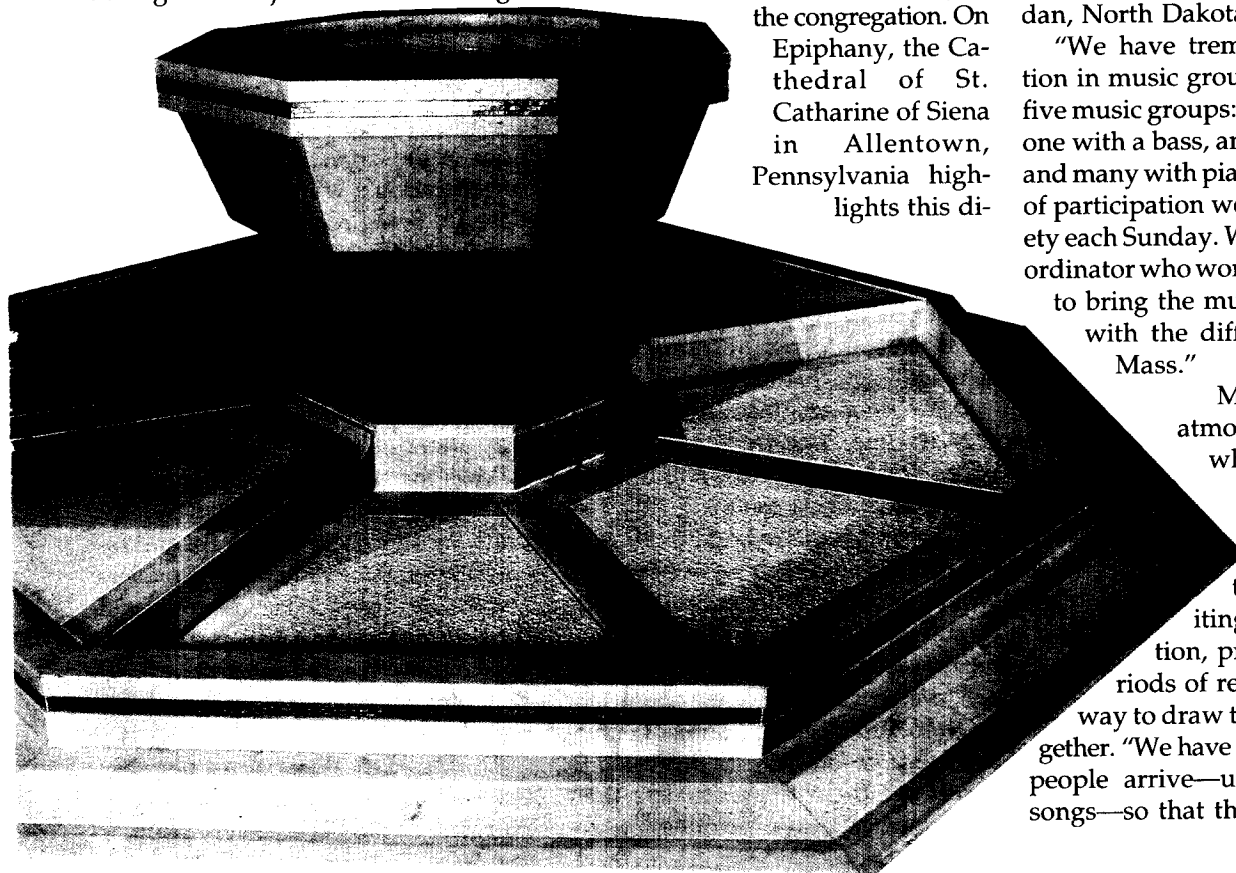
versity in a special Offertory procession. "We ask four or five people to bring up a gift at the Offertory that is indigenous to their ethnic background and is a traditional Christmas item from that culture," says Hammer. "We have had poinsettias from Mexico, a wayside shrine from Lithuania, a Christmas tree from Germany. We then ask them to say a prayer tying in this symbol with some part of Christian life."

Make a joyful noise

"We have spirited liturgies, and the single biggest reason is that we try to use music that people are familiar with, that has a bit of spirit in it, and that they feel comfortable singing," says David Vaughn, liturgy coordinator for Spirit of Life Church in Mandan, North Dakota.

"We have tremendous participation in music groups here. There are five music groups: some with guitars, one with a bass, another with drums, and many with pianos. With that kind of participation we have a lot of variety each Sunday. We have a music coordinator who works with each group to bring the music into continuity with the different parts of the Mass."

Music helps create the atmosphere of prayer, which is essential to the liturgy. It assists during transition periods, such as the entering and exiting of the congregation, processions, and periods of reflection. Music is a way to draw the congregation together. "We have music playing when people arrive—usually about three songs—so that they enter and begin



with a prayerful experience," says Vaughn. "We go by the philosophy that music ministry is to praise and worship the Lord. It shouldn't be a show."

As important as music is in liturgies, silence is as essential as the words that are spoken in creating a prayerful attitude. The liturgy should be a place where people are invited into silent, personal prayer. St. Joseph on the Brandywine in Wilmington, Delaware has made two simple changes during the Liturgy of the Word: readers pause between the readings, and the cantor animates the assembly in a way that can make sung prayer meaningful.

And while some Catholics may not be as comfortable with bodily gestures in worship as other Christians, the introduction of gestures, such as different prayer postures or blessing postures, can add a new dimension to worship and prayer.

"During Lent we invited the congregation to lift their hands in a prayerful position during the Prayers of the Faithful, in a manner similar to the celebrant's," says Father John Zapp of the Newman Center Parish at Kent State University in Kent, Ohio. "We did a brief explanation at the beginning of Lent and then gently reminded them each week. When I looked out into the congregation, about 80 to 90 percent were doing it!"

Amen for all seasons

The liturgical season has two high points: Advent/Christmas and Lent/Easter. At these times of the year, many parishes pull out all the stops to highlight the central message of the season.

During Advent the church focuses attention on the preparation for the

coming of Jesus. One way parishes highlight this message is through the Advent wreath. The wreath, with its four candles, set in a prominent place in the church, reminds believers of the four weeks of preparation before Christmas. Corpus Christi Church in Montdale, Pennsylvania used a different candle arrangement. Crynes recalls that some people were quite startled: "Instead of beginning with the four candles, we began with one candle and then introduced another one each week. They were very tall, about six to eight feet high."

All of the senses can be stimulated in the worship experience, and particularly the sense of smell is stimulated by incense, candles, and flowers. An Advent wreath made out of dried flowers, herbs, and eucalyptus made for a dramatic wreath at St. Joseph's in Crescent Springs, Kentucky. "The wreath was about five feet in diameter, and it rested on a 45-degree angle on a large stand. We put vigil lights in hurricane lanterns, so it was very bright. The wreath was placed in the vestibule; and if you didn't see it when you walked in, you encountered the smells immediately. We had a spotlight on it all during the season, so it was a constant reminder of Advent," says Father Mark Keene.

Since the Christmas season is such a busy time, Resurrection Parish in Santa Rosa, California has encouraged parishioners to "make holy" all the Christmas tasks to be done. "During Advent at the dismissal of Mass, we would give the congregation some homework. Since Christmas-card writing is such a big part of the season, we would encourage them that week to write a card to someone they needed to reconcile with. We tried to encourage them to spiritualize their regular tasks," says Caroline.

Decorations are also a big part of the Christmas season; and traditionally a church's sanctuary has been filled with flowers, banners, Christmas trees, and Nativity scenes. Crynes of Corpus Christi Church says, "I decorate the whole church during the Christmas and Easter season, not just the sanctuary. During Easter we hung banners throughout the church. Someone asked me if we were having a mall opening. I said, "No, but we are celebrating a tomb opening."

Lent, like Advent, is a time of preparation and waiting. It is a time when the whole church moves through a period of quiet reflection and penance. Lent is a time when most churches begin a simpler way of doing things. Simplicity is often very effective in creating an atmosphere of solemnity and awe. This can be done through prayer, music, and environment, including lighting.

Lent is a time when special prayer services, such as Vespers or the Stations of the Cross, can be added to a congregation's worship. These practices are being reintroduced in many parishes with some alterations from the older traditions. During Lent, Holy Spirit Church in Huntsville, Alabama celebrates the Stations of the Cross on Friday evenings. The rite has become so popular that often 300 to 350 people may attend. At times the community follows the traditional style; at other times a few families may plan the Stations, writing their own script and incorporating family life into the prayers and meditations. Also, members of the youth group have taken on the job of planning the Stations and applied each Station to the struggles faced in their lives.

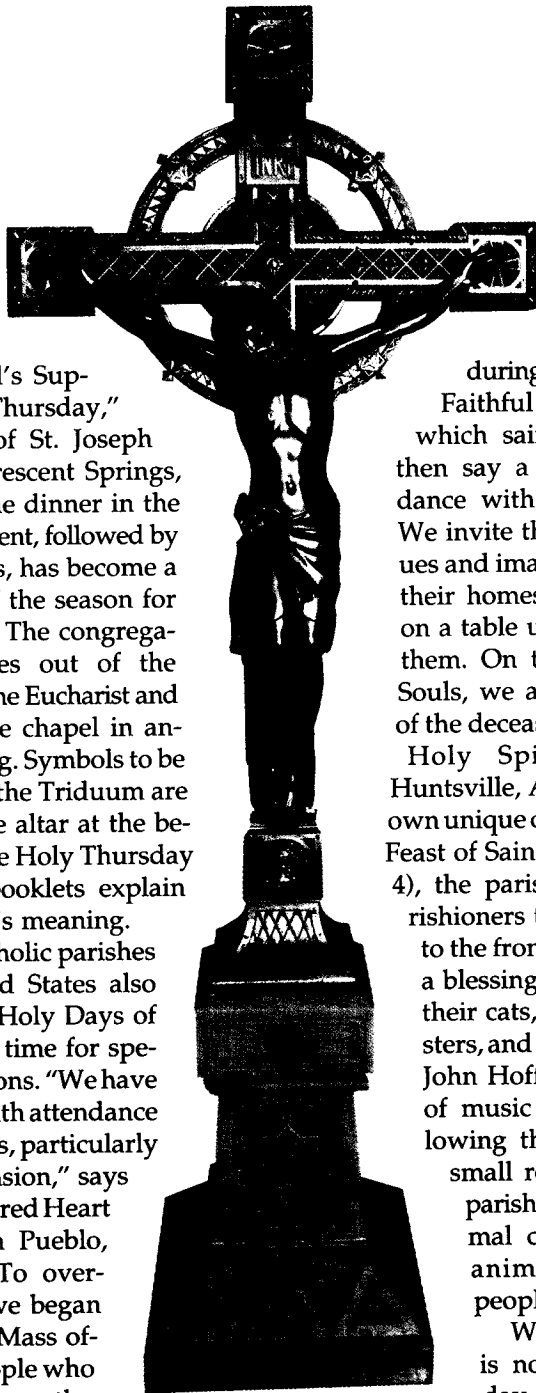
During Holy Week, most parishes make a special effort to plan beautiful liturgies. "It has become very popular

U.S. CATHOLIC

to join together for a parish dinner before the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday," says Keene of St. Joseph Church in Crescent Springs, Kentucky. The dinner in the church basement, followed by Mass upstairs, has become a high point of the season for parishioners. The congregation processes out of the church with the Eucharist and into a reserve chapel in another building. Symbols to be used during the Triduum are carried to the altar at the beginning of the Holy Thursday Mass, and booklets explain each symbol's meaning.

Many Catholic parishes in the United States also try to make Holy Days of Obligation a time for special celebrations. "We have a problem with attendance on Holy Days, particularly on the Ascension," says Becker of Sacred Heart Cathedral in Pueblo, Colorado. "To overcome that, we began having that Mass offered for people who have died over the past year. We send letters inviting families of those who have lost someone. We have a name banner in the front and chant these names during the Prayers of the Faithful.

"On All Saints' Day," Becker adds, "the children in the religious-education program dress up as saints and process around the block singing 'When the Saints Go Marching In.'



during the Prayers of the Faithful they come up, say which saint they are, and then say a prayer in accordance with that saint's life. We invite them to bring statues and images of saints from their homes and place them on a table up front and bless them. On the next day, All Souls, we also have pictures of the deceased on that table." Holy Spirit Church in Huntsville, Alabama began its own unique celebration. On the Feast of Saint Francis (October 4), the parish invited its parishioners to bring their pets to the front of the church for a blessing. "People brought their cats, dogs, mice, hamsters, and even a pony," says John Hoffman, the director of music and liturgy. Following the blessing was a small reception in which parishioners enjoyed animal crackers and their animals feasted on people crackers.

While Thanksgiving is not an official holy day, it is celebrated in many churches. St. Joseph Church in Mobridge, South Dakota has developed a special Thanksgiving liturgy that incorporates family life. Instead of a homily, members of the congregation offer personal thanks. "It's like 'The Phil Donahue Show,'" says Becker. "I walk through the congregation and extend the microphone to them, and people say some really beautiful things." Those

They come back to the church for Mass; and

in attendance—often entire families—are told to concentrate on Scripture to learn how to express themselves.

In the city of Huntsville, Alabama, the churches join together during the Thanksgiving season for joint ecumenical services. Holy Spirit Church joins up with the Methodist church next door and the Presbyterian church down the street. The celebration combines shared Word and music. A collection is taken up for the Interfaith Mission Service, which supports local social services.

Holy Spirit also combines its Palm Sunday Liturgy of the Word and blessing of palms with its Methodist neighbors. In the parking lot between the two churches, they share music and Scripture and the ministers bless the palms together. Then both communities proceed to their respective churches for the remainder of their celebrations.

Focus on the finish line

Liturgy is the heart and soul of the Christian community. Christians gather together to praise and give thanks to God and to remember the life and death of Jesus. Liturgical experts agree that this goal should be prominent in any decision to introduce a new practice, whether it be moving the candles or renovating the entire church. If it is not done well, there is little chance the spiritual life of the community or the individuals in the parish will grow. The ideas and suggestions shared here may not work for every parish, but they might help members of a liturgy team think of new ways to celebrate the Mass in their parish. Many communities have good ideas to share, so share them: good liturgies can happen everywhere. □