



## Are there liturgical guidelines for decorating the Church during Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter?

(Excerpts from an article written by Victoria Tufano, Director of Liturgy, Oak Park, IL)

“There are surprisingly few official “rules” about decorating churches, much to the chagrin of those who have been crowded out by Christmas poinsettias or engulfed by Easter lilies. At times, admittedly, the sanctuary [can begin to look] like it’s been attacked by a rioting mob of florists.

Much of what we do is based on tradition and preference. There are however, two church documents that offer us [priceless] guidance on the subject of church décor. The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM) provides direction on how the Mass should be celebrated. It is very specific about aspects of the liturgy that are to be the same everywhere, but more general about other areas, leaving it to the local bishops [and/or pastors] to provide guidelines.

The GIRM offers this useful bit of wisdom. Floral decorations in Advent should not overshadow the joy of Christmas and during Lent, there are generally no flowers, with some [very limited] exceptions. In general it says that flowers should be used sparingly and never on top [or in front] of the altar itself. [Additionally, floral placements around the altar are to be *extremely limited*, due to the encumbrance it creates for the presider/deacon when they traverse around the altar.]

The very last paragraph of the GIRM gives perhaps the best advice: ‘*Every effort should be made to ensure that ... the canons of art be appropriately taken into account and that noble simplicity come together with elegance.*’

(SR: U.S. Catholic Magazine, December 2009, p. 46)

The bishops of the United States have published guidelines for church art and architecture that also touch on season decoration, *Build on Living Stones*. It says that season decorations should ‘*draw people to the true nature of the mystery being celebrated rather than being ends in themselves.*’ And it gives a few specifics: living flowers or plants versus artificial greenery; seasonal decorations should remain throughout the whole season; traditional objects such as Advent wreaths and the Christmas crèche should be proportional to the space [and not in the sanctuary]; and banners are most effective when they do not carry words (including *joy, hope, and peace*).

When this document discusses art in general though, it offers a great deal for those who decorate to ponder: ‘*Quality art draws the beholder to the Creator,*’ and ‘*appropriateness is demonstrated by the work’s ability to bear the weight of mystery, awe, reverence, and wonder.*’

That may seem a lot to ask of a few poinsettias and a banner or two, but even these humble additions to our churches should point us toward prayer and praise.”

The Church’s guiding standards of seasonal environment and decorations are: Noble simplicity with elegance. Quality. Proportionality and appropriateness.