

THE WORK OF GOD'S HANDS: USING MATERIALS WELL, PART 1

This is the first article in a series focusing on the use and meaning of quality materials and craftsmanship in the worship environment.

Having spent the afternoon as a volunteer consultant on the local YMCA building project I learned a valuable lesson: cash starved projects in the secular world look at quality as carefully as they view their budget concerns. The committee rejected vinyl flooring and plastic coated wood floors in the public areas within fifteen minutes of discussion. The lack of immediate quality appearance and the quick deterioration of these materials quickly pointed to a porcelain tile alternative.

As liturgical consultants working with parish decision makers we all have experienced the rejection of life-time, high quality materials as profligate. "They are double the cost" the group says, opting instead for synthetic alternatives, including the all-time favorite choice, nylon carpeting.

I have nothing against carpeting for many applications, particularly residential. Carpeting is also as an appropriate material for meeting rooms, lounges, small chapel spaces and reconciliation rooms. Vinyl flooring in classrooms, kitchens, office spaces and some hallways may often prove to be a defensible decision of economy. However for obvious reasons carpeting is just not the material of choice for a worship environment. We all have been faced with the task of choosing materials carefully, keeping in mind all of the implications of their use.

Some of the very best examples of this point of view have been apparent to designers in the secular world for quite some time. Restorers of landmark buildings have stripped 19th century structures of the false fronts of post-war improvements, exposing the original facades and repairing them. Often the cost has been the same as the so-called enhancements of aluminum siding, plastic panels, and closed-up windows that spoiled the original architectural concepts. The resultant restored quality and distinctiveness has created favorable attention. Restoration consultants have encouraged building owners to consider the more thoughtful reconstructive approach over the "quick and dirty" cover-up solution. The costs are often comparable and the results are miles apart in integrity and beauty.

In liturgical environments the same case can be made for

custom hand made furnishings, appointments, and objet d'art, which can often be designed and executed for prices comparable to mass-produced items. Expert furniture builders in small shops have the talent and skill to craft distinctive, high quality altars, ambos, fonts, chairs, candle stands and other appointments from carefully selected hardwood materials, and often adorned with hand carved embellishments, metal work, or Venetian mosaic. These pieces are designed for the specific project and have a relationship to the room's style, geometry, and materials.

While selecting the correct products has always been an interior design concern in any kind of structure (Frank Lloyd Wright once said that if "you have to paint it, you've chosen the wrong material") worship space has a unique standing in the world of material selection. The local "Y" may choose porcelain tile because it is handsome and durable but a liturgical space has an added dimension to consider. Asking questions helps uncover this added dimension: What is the role of the worship environment in aiding an understanding of the Eucharist and the message of the gospel? What does a Corian™ altar table, a plastic laminate ambo, or a fiberglass Holy family statue say about our sense of the genuine in what we believe? Is it OK to use imitation materials that pretend to be something else?

Art pieces, statuary, glass, and high quality accessories such as sanctuary lamps, chrismatories, even tract racks and bulletin boards can be custom designed and constructed of high quality materials, many for catalogue prices. Fiberglass does indeed have its applications but as a suitable material for an interior shrine it is not a "noble" material.

When exposed to the elements synthetic materials often fall short of desirability. A common example is the polycarbonate storm-glazing panel that adorns the exterior facades of many traditional church buildings. Over the last thirty years this material, along with acrylic plastic has been installed over the leaded stained glass windows of churches all over the country.

Sold as vandal proof protection, this plastic material degrades and darkens within a few years, obscuring the beauty and charm of the art glass and making it impossible to clean and paint the exterior trim. This glazing solution has proved to be a poor value for those congregations who bought it, many of whom were not even aware that laminated glass, installed correctly, would have given them years of good service at about the same cost.

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As liturgical design consultants, architects, and artists we owe our clients a firm commitment to high quality design solutions. One way to do this is by pointing out that what appear to be “expensive” recommendations will more often than not prove to be better values than seemingly cheaper options.

This quote from *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship* says it best:

“Quality means love and care in the making of something, honesty and genuineness with any materials used, and the artist’s special gift in producing a harmonious whole, a well-crafted work.”

- E.J. Potente