



## Diocese of Springfield in Illinois

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Worship and the Catechumenate  
Commission for the Liturgy

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### **GATHERING PLACE in Roman Catholic Worship**

by Eliot Kapitan

#### **First question:**

Why is a gathering place a critical element in both the new building and the major renovation of Catholic churches? The liturgical books themselves give us guidance.

#### **From the *Rite of Dedication of a Church and an Altar*:**

The *Rite of Dedication of a Church and an Altar* [DCA] is a collection of rites used in the building of a new church, in the major renovation of an older building, and in the erection of a new altar. At the first Mass in a new or renovated church, it is preferred that the bishop gathers outside the building with the members of the assembly. This occasion of the first use of the building for worship reminds us that the People of God are a pilgrim people in procession to the Lord. The gathering at this door of the church building reoccurs throughout the year.

#### **From the *Roman Missal*:**

There are three days that call for the assembly to gather not in the nave or usual seating area of the church, but outside it. This gathering place may be a nearby church or chapel, or another inside or outside place that accommodates the entire assembly. These days in the life of the Church are:

- a) **The Presentation of the Lord, February 2.** This is a feast day that, when it falls on a Sunday, replaces the usual Mass texts of the Sunday in Ordinary Time. The people gather outside the church where Mass will be celebrated. After prayers and the blessing of candles, all process into the church for word and eucharist.
- b) **Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion, the beginning of Holy Week.** The people gather to pray, bless palm branches, and hear the gospel of the Lord's entrance into Jerusalem. The place for this commemoration is a suitable one distinct from the church to which the procession will move and large enough to hold everyone.
- c) **The Easter Vigil in the Holy Night of Easter.** The service of light begins this first liturgy of Easter with the blessing of the fire and the Easter candle. The assembly gathers at a large fire prepared in a suitable place outside the church. They are led into a darkened church by the Easter candle, the singing of "Christ our light," and the lighting of candles held by every member of the assembly.

#### **For the beginning of Lent:**

The *Ceremonial of Bishops* [CB] is a book of rubrics and instructions that help the bishop and the diocese celebrate liturgy that is simple, dignified, and as pastorally effective as possible. This liturgy is to stand as a model for all other celebrations throughout the diocese. The notes in this book, then, offers guidance to parishes Churches.

The *Roman Missal ( Sacramentary )*, at the beginning of the prayers for Lent, notes the importance of the bishop gathering with the people of the diocese for public prayer. The *Ceremonial of Bishops* [nos. 260-262] outlines how this gathering might take place. The Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship, in the *Circular Letter Concerning the Preparation and Celebration of the Easter Feasts* issued on 16 January 1988, extends this penitential gathering rite to every parish even when the bishop is not present. At the Mass of the First Sunday of Lent, the faithful gather outside the church for song, greeting, introduction, prayer. While singing the Litany of the Saints, the assembly processes into the church for word and eucharist [no. 23].

### **From the Roman Ritual:**

The gathering place also becomes the suitable place for other preparatory celebrations and for the beginning of processions. Among them are:

- a) ***Rite of Baptism for Children.*** The reception of children for baptism, whether within or outside Mass, takes place at the entrance of the church. Gathered there are children and parents, family and friends, godparents, and ministers [nos. 32-43]. The whole assembly may also gather here. Then all process in for the liturgy of the word.
- b) ***Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults.*** For the first rite in this collection of rites, the Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens, the inquirers, their sponsors, and at least a group of the faithful gather outside the church with the ministers. Because the questions, prayers, and the signing of the senses all happen there, it is desirable that the entire assembly also gather in this place. Then all process into the church for the liturgy of the word [nos. 48-60].
- c) ***Order of Celebrating Matrimony.*** Although it is not yet common practice, the rite calls for a welcoming rite to take place at the doors of the church. This includes at the very least the ministers and the bridal party [no. 19]. The entire assembly could begin there as well. The bridal party may also greet the members of the assembly as they arrive for and depart from the celebration.
- d) ***Order of Christian Funerals.*** The Vigil for the Deceased is among the first of the public rites the Church provides for grieving family and friends. It may take place either in the funeral home or in the church. Churches that have the space, can have the wake and the vigil take place there. On the next day, the Funeral Mass begins at or outside the doors of the church with the reception of the body, sprinkling with holy water, placing of the pall and only then processing into the church for word and eucharist. In addition to family and ministers, the assembly may meet the body at the door.

### **Final questions:**

What, then, must be considered in providing adequate space for gathering? In northern climates, many of the required liturgies cannot happen outside. But whether a parish is dealing with an inside or an outside space, it must ask: Is the place big enough for the Church to bless candles or palm branches or fire? Can mourners gather around the body for wake or funeral rites? Can inquirers become catechumens through questions, declarations, and signings? Can parishioners gather before and after liturgy to do parish business, works of charity, acts of friendship.

Gathering is something that begins with God. It is God who calls the assembly together and names it "Chosen People." The Church wisely provides for gathering places, so that the assembling Church can celebrate the liturgy in all its fullness.