

A SCHOOL'S GUIDE TO SIGNS AND SYMBOLS

WHY WORRY?

The Mass is God communicating with us through sacrament (a symbol that signifies what it effects). If sacraments don't signify, their ability to effect, or to 'work', is greatly compromised. Giving attention to the quality of the symbols is a pastoral response to the needs of the Assembly.

PRINCIPAL SYMBOLS

ASSEMBLY

The assembly, the Body of Christ, should experience itself as gathered and ordered for celebration. Its members should be able to see and hear clearly, and be in sufficient comfort to allow them to participate.

WORD

The Word of God should be able to be heard by all present. Amplification and loop systems, and signing, should be available as needed. The dignity of the Word should be indicated by the use of the Lectionary (or in some other way, if necessary).

BREAD AND WINE

Altar breads should be fresh. The large altar bread used by the priest should be large enough so that it can be 'truly broken into parts and distributed to at least some of the faithful', as the Church requires. Wine should be natural and pure and free from any foreign substance. It must be alcoholic wine (NB not all wine sold as Communion wine is intended for Catholic use, so check carefully with your supplier). In practice, while desirable, communion under both kinds may not always be practical in a school setting.

PRIEST

The priest is to lead the people in prayer, in listening and responding to God's word and in offering the Sacrifice through Christ in the Spirit to the Father. If he is to lead the assembly he needs to be carefully prepared, and in good time, as to what is proposed for a Mass. He also needs to exercise responsibility for those parts which most closely relate to his role.

OTHER MAIN SIGNS

ALTAR

The altar is where the Sacrifice of the Cross is made present and the Table of the Lord around which we gather. It is venerated as symbol of Christ, cornerstone of the Church and a Living Stone. It should be dressed with a cloth, and reserved for its Eucharistic function. Candles may be placed on the altar; flowers may be put next to the altar but not on it.

AMBO

The ambo or lectern is the Table of the Word and complements the altar (table for the sacrament). Its design should indicate the dignity of the Word. It should remain in its place throughout the Mass.

CROSS

The cross is a constant reminder of the cost of our salvation and a symbol of hope. The cross should be visible to the whole assembly during Mass. The cross should bear a figure of Christ crucified. The cross may be on or near the altar, or be brought in procession.

CHAIR

In a church the presider's chair is a symbol of the priest's office. It symbolises unity, leadership and service. When celebrating in a school hall it will rarely be possible to achieve this, and usually the chair will simply serve as a chair.

CANDLES

The light of candles signifies Christ the light of the world; the gradual burning down of the candle as wax is consumed in the flame symbolises Christ's self-sacrifice in the service of his mission. Only genuine wax candles should be used. Fake 'candles' with oil inserts are not permitted at Mass. Normally two, four, or six are to be used, according to the level of solemnity. Seven should be lit when the bishop presides at Mass.

VESSELS

When it is not practical for these to be of precious metal, they should be of gilded metal. Pottery or porcelain should not be used. Vessels for the altar bread/hosts should have the form of plates or shallow bowls, not chalices. Chalices should be large enough for the quantity of wine needed for consecration for communion.

VESTURE

The vestments worn by the priest are the stole and chasuble. Variety in colour gives effective outward expression to the seasons of the year. The priest and servers should also wear an alb, or (in the case of servers) cassock and cotta, although if these cannot be provided for servers they can wear their ordinary school clothes.