

Guidance on the Use of the School Chapel

Most Jesuit schools are fortunate to have a purpose-built chapel. While these chapels are predominantly used for worship and prayer, they are occasionally pressed into service for other purposes such as assemblies or concerts. This guidance is offered to encourage better understanding of some important principles about what is and is not appropriate use of the school chapel.

Sacred Space

Above all, the chapel needs to be recognized by everyone as a sacred space – a special, different space where different expectations of behaviour and attitude apply. It is the place where the sacrifice of the Mass is celebrated, where the Word of God is proclaimed, and where people can come in prayer and silence. The prayer of blessing of a chapel articulates this well:

*May [this church/chapel] be for your family a house of salvation
and a place for the celebration of your heavenly sacraments.
Here may the gospel of peace resound
and the sacred mysteries be celebrated,
so that your faithful, formed by the word of life
and by divine grace on their pilgrim way through the earthly city,
may merit to reach the eternal Jerusalem.*

Thought needs to be given as to how pupils, and staff, and visitors will enter and leave the sacred space. In silence? With genuflection (to the blessed sacrament) or a bow (to the altar)? Blessing themselves with holy water in recollection of baptism?

If the chapel is to be used for purposes other than worship or prayer, careful thought needs to be given to (a) whether this is an appropriate of the sacred space and (b) how this is done in a way that respects the sacred space.

Reservation of the Blessed Sacrament

At all times great care should be taken to show respect to the blessed sacrament and to make it possible for pupils, sometimes in large numbers, to do so to. This is best done by establishing a routine which pupils and staff are expected to follow, and an occasionally repeated reminder of what is expected and, importantly, an explanation of why.

There may be events which it is appropriate to hold in the chapel but when it is also appropriate to remove the blessed sacrament (ie. when the event will noticeably not allow the appropriate respect to be paid to the blessed sacrament).

If the blessed sacrament is to be removed to allow a particular event to take place in the chapel, it is best to consume the hosts at whatever Mass is celebrated previously.

If this is not possible, the blessed sacrament should be removed from the chapel and kept in an appropriate secure place (usually the sacristy) with the red sanctuary lamp lit, an appropriate notice explaining to any who enter that the blessed sacrament is reserved here temporarily, and appropriate behaviour from any who are in the sacristy.

Altar

The altar is the most important piece of liturgical furniture and needs to be treated as such. In the liturgical tradition, the altar represents Christ himself (which is why we bow to the altar, the priest kisses it, and it is incensed).

The rite of blessing of a new altar makes clear the symbolic importance of the altar:

*Blessed are you, Lord our God,
who accepted the sacrifice of Christ,
offered on the altar of the cross
for the salvation of the world.
Now, with a Father's love,
you call upon your people
to celebrate his memory
by coming together at his table.
May this altar, which we have built
for your holy mysteries,
be the centre of our praise
and thanksgiving.
May it be the table at which
we break the bread which gives us life
and drink the cup which makes us one.
May it be the fountain
of the unfailing waters of salvation.
Here may we draw close to Christ,
the living stone, and, in him,
grow into a holy temple.
Here may our lives of holiness*

*become a pleasing sacrifice
to your glory.*

It is highly inappropriate to use the altar casually for any other purpose – as a table, or to put papers, bags, projectors, or anything else upon it.

If the altar is to be moved to the side to allow use of the sanctuary, this should be done with reverence and the altar covered as completely as possible with a cloth (similar to a dust sheet to indicate the altar is out of use).

During prayer in the presence of the altar, it is always appropriate to light the altar candles (the liturgical practice of using the number of candles to indicate the solemnity of the feast is a useful catechetical tool in schools: two candles for ordinary days, four for feast days, six for great solemnities, and seven when the bishop of the diocese presides at the eucharist; and the paschal candle lit during the easter season).

Lectern

The lectern is the place from which the word of God is read and proclaimed. The lectern should always be treated as a special piece of liturgical furniture. It should not be used as a general lectern for assemblies or any other purpose. Even within the liturgy, the lectern should be used only for reading the word of God, for the proclamation of the gospel through preaching, and for the prayers of the faithful (the bidding prayers).

Thought should be given to the way in which the lectern is marked out – perhaps by having candles either side, or by having an arrangement which permits the book to be displayed to the congregation.

Presider's Chair

The presider's chair is also a special piece of liturgical furniture and should only be occupied by the priest presider at liturgy.

If a lay person is leading an act of worship and needs to sit, a chair should be placed separately from the presider's chair (which should be left unoccupied). The chair for a lay leader should, if possible, be so placed as to indicate that they are part of the assembly of people and not acting in a presiding role (which is reserved to the ordained) except when standing and speaking (and this should not normally be from their chair – so they sit on one place, close to the people, and lead in another, at the front facing the people).

Seasons and Feast Days

Consideration should be given to how the chapel signals the liturgical seasons and special feast days. – by a cloth in liturgical colour over the altar and lectern? Or banners? Traditionally this would have been signalled by the colour of the tabernacle veil.

Assemblies

School assemblies can be a lot of different things. Whether or not it is appropriate to use a chapel for an assembly will depend on the content of the assembly and the manner of its delivery.

If an assembly is an act of worship then the use of the chapel, as a sacred space, is highly desirable. Anything else that takes place in the assembly should be done in a way that is consistent with the gospel values which are proclaimed in the sacred space.

This can clearly include the celebration of successes, etc. But great care needs to be taken that the sacred space is not used predominantly for secular purposes, when the content of the assembly is simply information or instruction, or when disciplinary issues need to be addressed.

Much of this is about the way people, especially teachers in authority who are leading the assembly, conduct themselves. Most of what happens routinely in school assembly can be appropriately done in the chapel provided that person always shows respect for the sacred space him or herself.

It can, of course, always be argued that what is said in any assembly should be said in such a manner that it could be said in the chapel. However, there will be times when senior staff want to hold an assembly about behaviour where the manner is, shall we say, going to be uncompromising. It is best that such an assembly is held elsewhere. It is always important that pupils, and staff, see and know that the chapel is a sacred space where gospel value prevail in their most undiluted form.

Concerts

It is perfectly acceptable to hold a concert in a church or chapel but some thought needs to be given about protocol. Do you want to ask the audience to enter and wait in silence (a simple explanation is often all that is needed to achieve this happily – at least to the degree that people are respectful and whisper rather than chat loudly without regard for where they are). Applause is acceptable but cheering and whistling is not (again some simple guidance, and explanation, can easily achieve this). Do you want to begin with a prayer? If the concert is predominantly

secular then it should perhaps happen elsewhere.

furniture with appropriate respect (usually by covering it). The sanctuary should not be used or intruded upon.

Other Uses

Occasionally, there is a desire to use the chapel for some other purpose entirely – to store furniture temporarily during works, to park children, etc. Care always needs to be taken in these circumstances to remove the blessed sacrament and treat the liturgical