

Just Say No To Convention Center Liturgies

Michael Sean Winters | Dec. 14, 2009 NCR Today

Several of the recent episcopal ordinations, including that today in Duluth, Minnesota, have been held in convention centers to allow greater attendance. This is a dreadful concession to modern sensibilities.

First, there is the matter of aesthetics. No matter how hard they try, these makeshift auditoriums tend to have an industrial look to them. They lack beautiful art of any kind, let alone religious art. Inevitably, an electronic organ provides the music, its whiny sound no substitute for the rich, round sound of a real pipe organ.

Second, there is the fact of human memory and how it is often evoked by location. When my mother died a few years ago, her funeral was in the church where she had been baptized, received her first communion, and was married. It was where she had buried her own parents. It was where her children were baptized. In short, merely walking through the doors of Our Lady of Lourdes church brought forth a host of human and holy memories.

Finally, there is the theology of the episcopate. The bishop's cathedra, or seat, is a primary symbol of his teaching authority. It is from that word that we derive the English word cathedral. Canon law requires that a bishop preside at his cathedral for the major holy days of the year, a provision that reinforces the role of a bishop as the leader of worship in his diocese. Every cathedral should become a second parish for all Catholics within a diocese. Here in Washington, some archdiocesan events are held at the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception, which holds many more people than St. Matthew's Cathedral downtown, and at least the basilica is a church. But, it is not a cathedral and whenever possible I avoid archdiocesan events that are not held at the cathedral.

To ignore all this just to fit in a few more hundred people seems too high a price to pay. Symbols matter and if Catholics don't recognize that, who will?

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