

Photography as Spiritual Practice and Communal Art-Making for Worship

Like stained glass windows in a Gothic stone cathedral, art that is carefully constructed and selected invites contemplation and helps create an environment for worship. Worship takes place not only in sumptuous historic churches but also in modern spaces with a minimalist aesthetic as well as school gymnasiums, classrooms, and out of doors. Media art, like a stained-glass window, can enhance worship in a similar way, by inviting contemplation.

This guideline describes how parish groups and school leaders can use digital photography both as a spiritual practice and for communal art-making suitable for worship. It briefly suggests steps for leading a group of parishioners or students through an exercise of communal art-making, introduces the spiritual growth the process invites, and gives examples of suitable and unsuitable applications in liturgy. Lastly, the document includes some resources and a sample project. (See appendix 1)

God reveals Godself to us not only in the expected locations and extraordinary moments – holy places where God’s people have gathered – but also in the unexpected locations and moments of our daily lives. ¹

Eileen Crowley is an Associate Professor of Liturgy and Worship Arts at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, Illinois. She spoke in Calgary in the fall of 2013 and throughout the presentation she demonstrated ways that media art can be used in liturgy as an instrument to invite us to participate more deeply in the Mystery of God. “Media art is art born of technical skills, imagination, attention to aesthetics, and an intention to communicate more than words alone can say.”² In liturgy, this art functions to encourage participation, convey information, reinforce and enrich oral communications, open up an interactive space – within or outside us – for discovery and provide beauty.³ Although media art can be an integral part of a community’s liturgy it can also enhance our spiritual practice.

¹ Eileen Crowley, *A Moving Word*, 85.

² Eileen Crowley, *A Moving Word* (Minneapolis, Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 6.

³ *Ibid.*, 33.

Eileen acknowledged the communal nature of producing art. She encouraged small groups of people to come together for the purpose of enhancing the spiritual life of themselves and their communities by creating art together. One of these means is the use of photography.

Many people have cameras – including good quality ones on their phones. Little else is required – other than a desire to be more open and attentive to the presence of God and the signs of grace in our world. Photography can be a means for us to see with the eyes of our heart (Eph 1:18). It can be a way for us to slow down, to notice, to pay attention to details and things we normally rush past. It is an invitation to live life as though everything is a miracle.⁴ All places and circumstances have potential to be visible manifestations of God; in the busyness of our lives we often are not aware that we are on holy ground. Crowley reminds us that “God reveals Godself to us not only in the expected locations and extraordinary moments – holy places where God’s people have gathered – but also in the unexpected locations and moments of our daily lives.”⁵ Perhaps when we choose to use our gifts and talents we are being sent out as messengers and witnesses to discover and reveal God’s love in new ways and spaces.

The skill and aesthetics of photography involve many different dimensions including “composition, color, texture, scale and proportion, harmony and disharmony, balance and imbalance, symmetry and asymmetry, foreground and background, negative and positive space, and the overall integration or fragmentation of elements.”⁶ When photography becomes a communal practice beginners can learn from masters who are willing to share and pass on their skills and knowledge.

Coming together in a small group is an invitation to use our imagination and creativity to enter into a process of contemplation that can open us to transformation. Like all art, photography has the ability to engage us on multiple levels – emotionally, spiritually, intellectually and even physically.⁷

Crowley suggests that a small group commit to meet for a minimum of 4 – 6 times. Each occasion they would gather beginning with a prayer to the Spirit who dwells within each one and calls us to use and develop our gifts and talents. If some of the participants are new to photography perhaps briefly share a tip or technique that

⁴ Albert Einstein, <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/987-there-are-only-two-ways-to-live-your-life-one>

⁵ Eileen Crowley, *A Moving Word*, 85.

⁶ Eileen Crowley, *Liturgical Art for a Media Culture* (Minnesota, Liturgical Press, 2007), 80.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

might be helpful in getting to know and use digital single lens reflex cameras. There are many useful websites or blogs to assist with this.

Decide on a word or reading that will be used for reflection for the upcoming week. For example if the word selected was gratitude. Where might we find this in our daily lives? What could it look like? How might a photo capture this?

Participants are encouraged to spend about an hour during the week carrying out the activity. Everyone is invited to upload 5-7 photographs to a common website so that all can view them before the next meeting.

At all of the gatherings, after the prayer, each of the uploaded photos is viewed individually in silence for a few moments. Look at them with the eyes of your heart – receiving rather than taking. View the images as gifts and gaze upon them in loving, compassionate and curious ways.⁸ Those observing the image will share what the image evokes in them. Then the person whose photos are being viewed will share their experience and their insights. Where did we see God? Has God been revealed to us in a new way?

Following the sharing, a photography tip or technique may be shared along with the word or reading that will be the focus for the upcoming session. By choosing a word, prayer or reading we intentionally open ourselves to seek and receive grace in the upcoming days before we gather again. The meeting ends with a prayer of thanksgiving.

For parishes or schools who desire to produce art for a particular celebration, the small group could focus on the readings or a prayer. Using the format suggested above they could gather and view the collected images in a contemplative and reflective manner. Together they could choose appropriate photos and decide how best to utilize them in a suitable media design that may possibly be integrated into the community's liturgy. There are many creative ways to do this including: projection of images onto screens, walls, or fabric that has been hung for the occasion. Photographs could be displayed in the entranceway as people come into the worship space. Whatever means we choose should lead the assembly more deeply into the mystery we celebrate.

Photography as a spiritual practice has the ability to challenge our perceptions and stir our imaginations so that we encounter God in nature, in our relationships and in

⁸ Christine Painter, *Eyes of the Heart* (Indiana, Sorin Books, 2013), 91

our human activities. This encounter leads us to be explorers in our own backyards and we begin to see the beauty and grace that surrounds us. Doing this as a group allows us to expand our connectedness so that transformation can occur for both those who create and those who receive the creation.⁹

Bibliography

- Crowley, Eileen. *Liturgical Art for a Media Culture*. Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2007.
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- Einstein, Albert. Quote from <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/987-there-are-only-two-ways-to-live-your-life-one>
- Gallardetz, Richard. *Transforming our Days: Spirituality, Community and Liturgy in a Technological Culture*. New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2000.
- Painter, Christine. *Eyes of the Heart: Photography as a Christian Contemplative Practice*. Indiana: Sorin Books, 2013.

⁹ Eileen Crowley, *Liturgical Art for a Media Culture*, 75.

Appendix I

Resources

<http://photogsp.weebly.com/>

<http://abbeyofthearts.com/classes/self-study-online-classes/eyes-of-the-heart-photography-as-contemplative-practice/>

https://www.ted.com/talks/louie_schwartzberg_nature_beauty_gratitude

http://www.academia.edu/Documents/in/Photography_as_a_Spiritual_Practice

<http://www.eileendcrowley.com/communal-art-making.html>

Application

The projection of images as art is different from the pedestrian and merely functional use of projection for lyrics or texts that the assembly will voice.

- In many cases, the media screens already installed are too small to have an artistic impact. Also consider using a large wall or hanging fabric or another material that can create a suitable canvas.
- Take care that the art does not itself become a moving presentation, like a slideshow presentation. You do not want to create a show to be watched. Rather, the image needs to encourage active participation by inviting the viewer into itself and into the worship.
- Images should not suggest an interpretation or narrate what is happening in the worship.
- The images should never compete with or distract from the liturgical action.
- In many churches, media art might not be suitable in the sanctuary during Mass. However, it might be appropriate in the narthex or in the parish hall to set the tone for the liturgical season or feast or to invite the viewer to hear the Gospel on a deeper level.

Some suitable applications of this ministry in the liturgy:

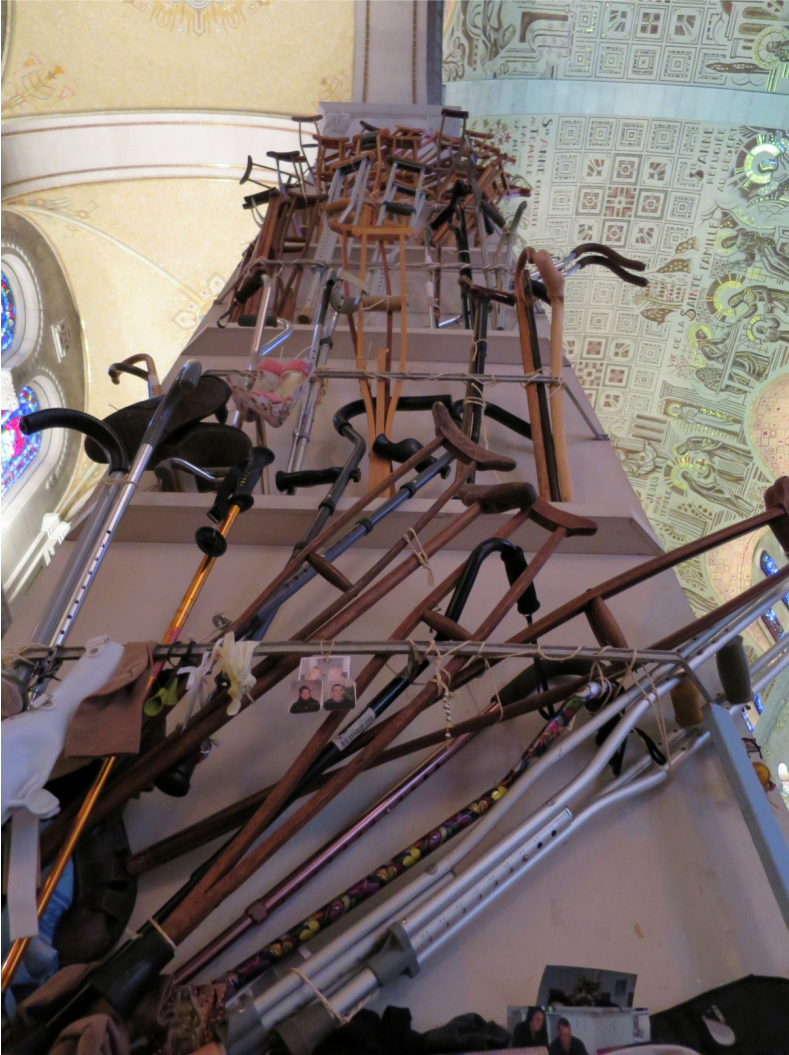
- Time lapse of sunset used before the start of Evening Prayer. The final image might remain throughout the service.
- Use like stained glass, static imagery around a space that is otherwise not sacred such as a gymnasium.
- During a devotional service of the rosary an image could be shown to focus the prayer of each decade.
- Photographs could be used as Stations of the Cross throughout the hallway of a school or in a church.
- Images from the community could be shown during carol-singing before Mass at Christmas.
- A single image or a set could be shown for contemplation or discussion before or after Mass in the narthex or hall of the church.
- The process of communal art making could be a meaningful spiritual activity for a groups of students in religion classes, in sacramental preparation classes, or for RCIA candidates. The fruit of the process might be used or shown in a retreat or for the larger community gathering for worship.

Appendix II

Example

The Diocesan Liturgical Commission conducted the process themselves to create an example. In Advent and Lent the diocese of Calgary holds a program called “Rejoice in God’s Mercy” in which all parishes in the diocese have the sacrament of Reconciliation available on Wednesday evenings. The Commission chose these four images to invite the viewer into the theme of mercy, both the mercy God offers through the sacrament of Reconciliation and the mercy all of us are called to extend to others. Only one image would be shown each week for penitents to contemplate while they wait their turn to go to confession and afterwards as they pray in thanksgiving and perhaps complete their penance. These images are one example of what could be done. You are welcome to use them in your own community or even better, lead a group to create your own art!

Advent I



Advent II



Advent III



Advent IV



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