

A teacher's guide to Signs & Symbols at Mass

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: *Bread* should be fresh (even if altar breads are being used). The large Host 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)

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; 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 is table of God's 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 word; 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. 2, 4, or 6 are to be used, according to the level of solemnity. 7 should be lit when the Archbishop presides at Mass.

Eucharistic 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 Body of Christ 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 outer vestures 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, although if this cannot be provided for servers they can wear their ordinary school clothes.

A teacher's worksheet for **Signs & Symbols at Mass**

Symbols for school Masses

Unlike the other worksheets this is not for a particular Mass. Rather it is for a review of the quality of symbols regularly used at Mass in or with the school in order to see whether

- any key symbols are regularly not being used
- the quality of any symbol used is weak or compromised and would benefit from being improved on.

You will find fuller and clear guidance in Chapter Two of *Celebrating the Mass*. Available from www.cts-online.org.uk or as a PDF from www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Resources/GIRM/Documents/CTM.pdf

Assembly	How does the gathering work? <i>Can everyone see and hear?</i> Is there room to move easily for Communion etc	
Word	Are the readers well prepared? <i>Has the congregation been well prepared to listen and understand?</i> Is the Lectionary treated with dignity?	
Bread & Wine	Are the symbols clearly visible? <i>Are they understood?</i> Is the large Host broken so that it is 'truly broken into parts and distributed to at least some of the faithful? Is Communion ministered under both kinds?	
Priest	Has the priest been properly prepared for his role? <i>If not how might this be improved on?</i> Is the priest allowed to preside? <i>Are parts of his role being, improperly, taken by others - eg at introduction or conclusion of the Mass, proclaiming of Gospel?</i>	

<p>Altar</p>	<p>Is the altar worthy of the celebration? <i>Can it be seen by all the congregation?</i> Is it properly dressed? <i>Is it the right height for the priest and the right size to hold comfortably all it needs to hold.</i></p>	
<p>Ambo</p>	<p>Is the ambo worthy of the celebration? <i>Is it suitable for those who are to read from it?</i> Can it be clearly seen by all of the congregation? <i>Is it large enough to hold the Lectionary?</i></p>	
<p>Cross</p>	<p>Is there a cross, with a figure of Christ crucified on it, placed on or near the altar, and clearly visible to the congregation at least? <i>Is there a processional cross (which if left at or near the altar, can perform both functions)?</i></p>	
<p>Candles</p>	<p>Are the altar candles adequate to their function of highlighting the dignity and festiveness of the celebration? <i>Are they made of real wax?</i> Are seven available for when the Archbishop celebrates?</p>	
<p>Altar linen</p>	<p>Is the altar linen in good condition? <i>Free from stains, and carefully ironed?</i> Is there sufficient linen to meet your needs?</p>	

<p>Liturgical books</p>	<p>Are the correct liturgical books being used? <i>In the right sized volumes to meet the needs of the ministers?</i></p>	
<p>Vesture</p>	<p>Are vestments available for the priest in the right liturgical colours? Are properly fitting albs available for the altar servers?</p>	
<p>Incense</p>	<p>When is incense used? <i>When is it not? Why?</i></p>	
<p>Flowers and other decoration</p>	<p>Are fresh flowers or other suitable decorative items used to enhance the beauty and dignity of the celebration? <i>Are flowers 'fasted from' during Lent?</i> Are the key places of celebration decorated, highlighting both word and sacrament?</p>	
<p>Participation aids</p>	<p>Are necessary participation aids provided for children (and adults)? <i>Are processes in place to help the children (and adults) learn the texts of the Ordinary of the Mass so they do not keep needing the basic participation aids?</i></p>	<p>The responses should be passed to..... for consideration and discussion before.....</p>