Very rightly the fine arts are considered to rank among the noblest activities of man's genius, and this applies especially to religious art and to its highest achievement, which is sacred art. These arts, by their very nature, are oriented toward the infinite beauty of God which they attempt in some way to portray by the work of human hands; they achieve their purpose of redounding to God's praise and glory in proportion as they are directed the more exclusively to the single aim of turning men's minds devoutly toward God.

—Sacrosanctum Concilium, 122.
Introduction

In his 1999 Letter to Artists, Saint Pope John Paul II referenced the work of the noted Polish poet, Cyprian Norwid, who wrote that "beauty is to enthuse us for work, and work is to raise us up." While this could be said to be true of all that is beautiful, Norwid's words are particularly applicable to sacred art. Sacred art plays a special role in inspiring men and women for the work of the liturgy, which has as its primary aim the glorification of God and the sanctification of souls. As Blessed Pope Paul VI noted, sacred art "is meant to bring the divine to the human world, to the level of the senses, then, from the spiritual insight gained through the senses and the stirring of the emotions, to raise the human world to God, to his inexpressible kingdom of mystery, beauty, and life."2

Because sacred art plays such an important role in the liturgical life of the Church, it is appropriate to consider its proper usage and function, bearing in mind that "the Church has always held the ministry of the arts in the highest esteem."3 The following Guidelines are intended to serve as a resource for pastors and others who are entrusted with the commissioning and care of sacred art in church buildings in the Archdiocese of New York. Questions regarding these Guidelines may be directed to either the Office of Liturgy or members of the archdiocesan Commission on Liturgical Art and Architecture.

What is Sacred Art?

Within the Catholic tradition, the term sacred art refers to the ways in which the Church community has expressed the transcendent mystery of God through artistic media in an effort to "evoke the mystery of the Word made flesh."4 This type of art has the purpose of raising

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4 LA, 5.
the mind and heart to God and expressing the mysteries of faith through the talents of artists, who are called to participate in God’s creative work through their artistic endeavors.\footnote{LA, 1.}

\textit{Devotional art}, as a type of \textit{sacred art}, seeks to "enrich the spiritual life of the community and personal piety of its members."\footnote{United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, \textit{Built of Living Stones: Art, Architecture, and Worship [BLS]} (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000), 155.} When devotional art is placed in church buildings, it should be seen as, in some way, derived from the liturgy as the summit and source of the Church's life. As well, it should lead the faithful to their full, active, and conscious participation in these same celebrations. Most images and sculptures in church buildings function as \textit{devotional art}.

\textit{Liturgical art} has a direct connection to the actions of the liturgy and, as such, plays a crucial role in the celebration of the sacraments. In this sense, \textit{liturgical art} is a type of \textit{sacred art} which can be said to be functional, to the extent that it is both expressive of, and oriented to, the celebration of the mysteries of faith. Examples of \textit{liturgical art} include sacred vessels and vestments, as well as the principal liturgical furnishings of a church, including the altar, crucifix, tabernacle, ambo, celebrant's chair, and the baptismal font.\footnote{Benedict XVI, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation \textit{Sacramentum caritatis} (February 22, 2007), 41.}

While \textit{devotional art} and \textit{liturgical art} play different roles in relationship to Christian worship, each forms an important part of the liturgical life of a parish community and is deserving of a place within a church building.

\textbf{Styles of Sacred Art}

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council noted that "the Church has not adopted any particular style of art as her very own; she has admitted styles from every period according to the natural talents and circumstances of peoples, and the needs of the various rites."\footnote{Vatican II, \textit{Sacrosanctum Concilium [SC]} (December 4, 1963), 123.} Even in its profound openness to all styles of art, the Church nevertheless recognizes that sacred art should possess certain qualities. The first of these is a beauty "grasped in the integrity,
proportion, and purity of the work of art." Such art should draw the viewer to contemplation of divine realities by making "perceptible... and attractive the world of the spirit, of the invisible, of God". While, as has been noted, older styles of art need not be exclusively used in church buildings, the Church's artistic patrimony can nevertheless be of assistance in judging the suitability of contemporary styles to function in this manner of expression.

Sacred art is also characterized by an "indefinable but vibrant value, the artistic spirit, the lyrical experience in the artist that is reflected in his work." In this way, sacred art serves as the product of a dialogue between the artist and God, which is the "essence of religious experience and artistic creativity." The fruit of this conversation between craftsman and the Creator is art that both "evokes wonder at its beauty [and also] leads beyond itself to the invisible God."

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9 Pope Paul VI, Address to the Pontifical Commission for Sacred Art in Italy, DOL 4326; Summa theologiae 1a, 39.1.
10 LA, 12. See also Gaudium et spes, 62; Opera artis, Introduction.
11 BLS, 147.
12 BLS, 180.
13 LA, 1.
14 BLS, 148. See also Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC], 2502.
General Considerations When Commissioning Sacred Art

As the bishops of the United States have noted, "an essential ingredient for a successful marriage between the artistic needs of the Church and the creative talent of the artist is the ability to collaborate." Artists must be knowledgeable of the unique requirements of sacred art, and should seek to apply their skills and creativity to the needs of a community at prayer. Pastors and others who are entrusted with the commissioning of artistic works destined for use in churches should cultivate the unique vocation of artists by offering direction regarding the faith of the Church and the particular circumstances and needs of the community. At the same time, the independence and creative gifts of the artist should be respected and fostered.

The process of dialogue which produces "truly worthy and beautiful artwork can transform the artist and the community for which it is intended." For this reason, the use of "catalog art" in churches is generally to be avoided, as "the integrity and energy of a piece of art, produced individually by the labor of an artist" and in consultation with the community, will be a more authentic source of mutual spiritual enrichment than are objects that are mass-produced.

Inasmuch as sacred art is meant to be expressive of eternal truths, artists should be encouraged to choose materials and designs that are considered by the community to be enduring, noble, and suitable for the sacred liturgical actions. In this regard, the characteristics of form, color, texture, weight, and density should all be considered in the selection of materials and the design of sacred art.

While "artists and communities should be cautious and discerning about promoting features closely identified with the values and attitudes of any class, ethnic, or age group to the exclusion of others in the community," parishes which are made of up diverse communities should seek to include works of art that speak to both the unique cultural values and traditional devotional expression of each of these groups, as well as a shared faith in Christ and common membership in the Church.

Special care should be taken in the selection of Marian images that are displayed for the veneration of the faithful. Such works should foster a reflection on the intimate connection between the Mother of God and the liturgies which celebrate the saving work of her Son.

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15 BLS, 158.
16 LA, 1; BLS, 154.
17 BLS, 151.
18 BLS, 147.
19 BLS, 162.
20 BLS, 157.
Similarly, images of other saints should also lead the faithful toward the mysteries of faith. In a particular way, "care should... be taken that their number not be increased indiscriminately, and moreover that they be arranged in proper order so as not to draw the attention of the faithful to themselves and away from the celebration itself. There should usually be only one image of any given saint." 

Sacred vessels should be made from precious metal or, as is permitted in the United States, from another solid material that is considered to be precious or noble, such as ebony or other harder woods that are nonabsorbent. Vessels made from glass, earthenware, clay, or other materials that break easily should not be used for the celebration of the liturgy. If vessels are made from a material less precious than gold, they should generally be gilded on the inside.

Like other media of sacred art, sacred vestments should be made of noble materials which contribute to the beauty of the liturgical celebration. Such beauty need not be expressed principally through elaborate ornamentation, but rather, through the quality of the material used and the design of the vestment itself. Symbols depicted on vestments should be expressive of sacred realities.

**The Process of Commissioning Sacred Art**

Pastors and others who are entrusted with the commissioning of sacred art will want to begin the process of selecting an artist and design with prayer and study. Pastors are encouraged to gather parishioners who have a love for, and knowledge of, the sacred arts during this initial phase. Others may also be called upon for their expertise as the process of commissioning a piece continues and develops. During the initial phase of study and consultation, the group may wish to review the pertinent documentation regarding the Church's teaching on sacred art, including chapter seven of Sacrosanctum Concilium, chapter five of the General Instruction of the Roman Missal, and chapter three of Built of Living Stones.

A listing of potential artists can then be assembled. Local and regional artists should be considered when developing this list, and the Office of Liturgy may be contacted for recommendations. Church architects and other pastors who have recently commissioned works of sacred art may also be able to suggest possible candidates. Once a list of

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21 General Instruction of the Roman Missal [GIRM], 318.
22 Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacrament, Redemptionis Sacramentum (March 25, 2004), 117.
23 GIRM, 328-329.
24 GIRM, 344.
prospective artists has been assembled, letters can then be sent to the potential candidates, requesting résumés, brochures, portfolios, letters of reference, etc.

After this information is gathered, the pastor and those assisting him should review the received material. Interviews and presentations may be scheduled, and churches where the candidates' artwork is currently displayed can be visited during this phase.

Once an artist is selected, both parties should sign a contract or letter of agreement in which the parish's needs, budget, timeline, and expectations are clearly articulated. During the design process, pastors and those assisting him should be free to review and approve, modify, or even reject an artist's model/sketch/rendering/maquette of the commissioned work. Contracts should indicate the amount and time of payment, the process to be followed if the artwork is rejected by the parish during the design process, and copyright usage. In the case of larger commissions, archdiocesan policy regarding the approval of capital improvements should be observed before a contract or letter of agreement is signed.

Once the design is secured and the piece is produced, the commissioned work should be blessed after it has been installed in the space of worship, using the appropriate blessing from the *Book of Blessings*. This also applies to smaller pieces of liturgical art, including vessels and vestments.

*Donations of Art*

Special care should be taken when accepting donations of art for use in spaces of worship. Such art should meet the criteria for devotional or liturgical art, as outlined above. As well, donations should be accompanied by a signed agreement which clearly states that, once the art is accepted, it becomes the property of the parish to be used as the parish determines.

*Care and Maintenance of Sacred Art*

*Devotional and Liturgical Works*

Because of the great variety of materials used in the production of images, statues, sculptures, and other liturgical appointments, those who are truly experts in the field of art conservancy should be consulted in the maintenance and care of these types of sacred art in parish churches. Important factors to consider in the work of conservancy include lighting, climate control, proximity to well-traveled areas of the church, and exposure to the elements. The Office of Liturgy may be contacted for a listing of recommended firms who specialize in this work.
Works of significant artistic or historic value should be photographed and appraised by a reputable firm. Copies of this documentation should be maintained in both the parish and diocesan archives, and parish insurance policies should reflect the value of these works.\textsuperscript{25}

Vessels

Sacred vessels made from metals should be handled carefully, regularly washed with warm water and gentle detergent, dried with a soft cotton cloth, and stored in a tarnish-resistant bag. Vessels should not be submerged in water, as water can become trapped in the hollow portions of these objects. Sacred vessels that are worn, scratched, or deteriorated should not be used for the celebration of the liturgy. Such vessels may be refurbished by a reputable firm and once again placed into service. Linens which are used in association with sacred vessels should be regularly washed and maintained.\textsuperscript{26}

Chalices, ciboria, and monstrances made of gold or sterling silver should be stored in a locked parish safe. Only priests, deacons, staff sacristans, and other authorized personnel should have access to this safe. Vessels of great value should not be stored in a tabernacle for extended periods of time.\textsuperscript{27}

Sacred vessels in the custody of a parish should be clearly identified as part of the parish’s patrimony or as the personal possession of a resident priest. Often, chalices of former resident priests are willed to a parish or have been in a parish for many years. These should remain in the possession of the parish, unless the priest who has donated the chalice has stipulated otherwise in writing.

Sacred vessels that are unique, irreplaceable, or of significant monetary value should be photographed, appraised by a reputable firm, and appropriately insured. Photos and appraisals should be kept in both the parish and diocesan archives, so that the vessels can easily be identified in the case of theft, fire, or loss.\textsuperscript{28}

Vestments

Sacred vestments should be stored either in drawers designed to accommodate them or hung on hangers that are specially designed for liturgical vestments. This manner of storage will keep vestments in good repair for many years. Vestments should be regularly cleaned, and

\textsuperscript{25} OA, 3.
\textsuperscript{26} See Appendix, United States Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy, The Care and Cleansing of Altar Linens, Purification and Cleansing of Communion Vessels and Use of the Sacrarium (March 19, 2001).
\textsuperscript{27} GIRM, 314; Sacred Congregation for the Sacraments, Instruction Nullo umquam tempore (May 28, 1938), 5.
\textsuperscript{28} OA, 3.
vestments which have become worn should be repaired before they are returned to liturgical use. Vestments which cannot be repaired should be disposed of by either burning or burial.

An inventory of those vestments which have significant artistic or historical value should be kept in both the parish and diocesan archives.\textsuperscript{29}

\textit{Disposition of Works of Sacred Art}

In the life of a parish or other church institution, works of sacred art may become unsuitable for use in liturgical worship. This can occur when:

- these works have become worn to a point beyond the possibility of restoration;
- they do not satisfy current liturgical norms;
- there is a duplication of items due to parish mergers;
- new works are commissioned in the course of renovations or building projects;
- a parish is closed or suppressed.

In these cases, the artistic, historical, and monetary value of such works should be assessed by experts. During this period of assessment, and in consideration of the eventual disposition of these works, such art should be treated with "reverence and not be employed for improper or profane use even if they are under the control of private individuals."\textsuperscript{30}

Objects that are judged to be no longer suitable for liturgical use may be disposed of in one in the following ways:

a. Re-purposing

Consideration should be given to using older works of art in new parish constructions or renovations. The archdiocesan Office of Church Patrimony can be of assistance in making these items available to other parishes. Works may also placed in a "Heritage Room" used by a parish to document its history.

b. Donation/Sale

Rare or historically significant objects which are no longer usable in a worship space may be donated or sold to a reputable museum, parishioners, or other individuals.

\textsuperscript{29} OA, 3.  
\textsuperscript{30} CIC, 1171.
c. Storage

Works of art may be documented and properly stored to protect them from future damage.

d. Destruction

If a work is no longer usable, it may be disposed of by burning or burial. Objects disposed of in this way are no longer considered sacred or “blessed”.

Disposition of Major Works

Objects of very great artistic or historical value, or those donated to the Church through a vow, may not be sold without special permission of the Holy See. In the Archdiocese of New York, the archbishop should be consulted in the disposition (i.e., sale, donation, repurposing, storage, destruction) of any work valued at over $30,000 so that the concerns of donors and the requirements of canon law are fulfilled.

Relics

Special care should be taken with relics in the disposition of reliquaries and altars. If relics can no longer be safeguarded in a proper manner at a parish or institution, they should be transferred with their accompanying documentation to another parish or given to the Office of Church Patrimony for distribution to those parishes which request relics for the dedication of new altars. As part of the sacred heritage of the Church, relics may never be sold.

Special Circumstances and Additional Considerations

Additional questions may arise regarding the disposition of works of sacred art. These may be referred to the archdiocesan Office of Liturgy and members of the archdiocesan Commission on Liturgical Art and Architecture.

Archdiocese of New York
Office of Liturgy
201 Seminary Avenue
Yonkers, NY 10704
914.968.6200, ext. 8177
liturgy@archny.org

31 CIC, 1292.2.
32 BLS, 168. See OA, 3.
33 CIC, 1190.
In recent years the Secretariat for the Liturgy has received multiple inquiries concerning the care and cleansing of altar linens. The following article, approved by the Committee on the Liturgy at its March 19, 2001 meeting, is provided for the information of those charged with the care of altar linens.

Whatever is set aside for use in the liturgy takes on a certain sacred character both by the blessing it receives and the sacred functions it fulfills. Thus, the cloths used at the altar in the course of the Eucharistic celebration should be treated with the care and respect due to those things used in the preparation and celebration of the sacred mysteries.

This brief statement reflects on the importance of reverently caring for altar linens which, because of their use in the liturgy, are deserving of special respect. These linens should be "beautiful and finely made, though mere lavishness and ostentation must be avoided." Altar cloths, corporals, purificators, lavabo towels, and palls should be made of absorbent cloth and never of paper.

Altar linens are appropriately blessed according to the Order for the Blessing of Articles for Liturgical Use. The blessing of a number of such articles for liturgical use may take place "within Mass or in a separate celebration in which the faithful should take part."

Altar Cloths
Just as the altar is a sign for us of Christ the living stone, altar cloths are used "out of reverence for the celebration of the memorial of the Lord and the banquet that gives us his body and Blood." By their beauty and form, they add to the dignity of the altar in much the same way that vestments solemnly ornament the priests and sacred ministers. Such cloths

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1 The term altar linen is traditionally used to describe cloths of any fine material used in the liturgy.
2 Book of Blessings [BOB], 1343.
3 BOB, 1344.
4 It should be recalled that such a blessing is appropriate for "the ciborium or pyx, the monstrance, the vestments worn by ordained ministers, such linens as the corporal and altar cloths, and hymnals and service books (Sacramentary, Lectionary, etc.)." BOB, 1343.
5 BOB, 1345.
6 GIRM, 298.
7 GIRM, 304.
also serve a practical purpose in absorbing whatever may be spilled of the Precious Blood or other sacramental elements. Thus, the material of altar cloths should be absorbent and easily laundered. While there may be several altar cloths in the form of drappings or even frontals, their shape, size, and decoration should be in keeping with the design of the altar. Unless the altar cloths have been stained with the Precious Blood, it is not necessary that they be cleaned in the sacarium. Care should be taken, however, that proper cleaning methods are used to preserve the beauty and life of the altar cloth. It is appropriate for those who care for sacred vessels, cloths, and other instrumenta of the liturgy to accompany their work with prayer.

Corporals
Sacred vessels containing the Body and Blood of the Lord are always placed on top of a corporal. A corporal is spread by the deacon or another minister in the course of the preparation of the gifts and the altar. When concelebrants receive the Eucharist from the altar, a corporal is placed beneath all chalices or patens. Finally, it is appropriate that a corporal be used on a side table, and placed beneath the sacred vessels which have been left to be purified after Mass.

Because one of the purposes of the corporal is to contain whatever small particles of the consecrated host may be left at the conclusion of Mass, care should be taken that the transferral of consecrated hosts between sacred vessels should always be done over a corporal. The corporal should be white in color and of sufficient dimensions so that at least the main chalice and paten may be placed upon it completely. When necessary, more than one corporal may be used. The material of corporals should be absorbent and easily laundered.

Any apparent particles of the consecrated bread which remain on the corporal after the distribution of Holy Communion should be consumed in the course of the purification of the sacred vessels.

When corporals are cleansed, they should first be rinsed in a sacrarium and, only afterwards, washed with laundry soaps in the customary manner. Corporals should be ironed in such a way that their distinctive manner of folding helps to contain whatever small particles of the consecrated host may remain at the conclusion of the Eucharistic celebration.

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8 GIRM, 304.
9 GIRM, 73, 118, 139.
10 GIRM, 248.
11 GIRM, 183.
12 While the form of the corporal is not prescribed by liturgical law, it is traditionally square in shape and folded in nine sections which form a "pocket" within which remaining fragments of the consecrated host may be contained. Accordingly, at the end of every Mass, care should be taken to fold the corporal in such a manner that whatever articles may remain will be folded within it.
**Purificators**

Purificators are customarily brought to the altar with chalices and are used to wipe the Precious Blood from the lip of the chalice\textsuperscript{13} and to purify sacred vessels.\textsuperscript{14} They should be white in color. Whenever the Precious Blood is distributed from the chalice, poured into ancillary vessels, or even accidentally spilled,\textsuperscript{15} purificators should be used to absorb the spill. The material of purificators should be absorbent and easily laundered. The purificator should never be made of paper or any other disposable material.

Because of their function, purificators regularly become stained with the Precious Blood. It is, therefore, essential that they should first be cleansed in a sacrarium and, only afterwards, washed with laundry soaps in the customary manner. Purificators should be ironed in such a way that they may be easily used for the wiping of the lip of the chalice.\textsuperscript{16}

**Lavabo Towels**

The Order of Mass calls for the washing of the hands (lavabo) of the priest celebrant in the course of the preparation of the gifts and the altar.\textsuperscript{17} Since it is his hands and not only his fingers (as in the former *Order of Mass*) which are washed at the lavabo, the lavabo towel should be of adequate size and sufficiently absorbent for drying his hands. Neither the color nor the material of the lavabo towel is prescribed, though efforts should be made to avoid the appearance of a "dish towel," "bath towel," or other cloth with a purely secular use.

**Other Cloths**

Other cloths may also be used at Mass. A pall may be used to cover the chalice at Mass in order to protect the Precious Blood from insects or other foreign objects.\textsuperscript{18} In order that palls may be kept immaculately clean they should be made with removable covers of a worthy material which may be easily washed in the sacrarium and then laundered. Chalice veils, either of the color of the day or white, may be fittingly used to cover the chalice before it is prepared and after it has been purified.\textsuperscript{19}

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\textsuperscript{13} *GIRM*, 286.

\textsuperscript{14} *GIRM*, 279.

\textsuperscript{15} *GIRM*, 280: "If the Eucharistic bread or any particle of it should fall, it is to be picked up reverently. If any of the Precious Blood spills, the area where the spill occurs should be washed and the water poured into the sacrarium."

\textsuperscript{16} While the form of the purificator is not prescribed by liturgical law, it is traditionally rectangular in shape and folded three times, lengthwise.

\textsuperscript{17} *GIRM*, 76, 118c, 145.

\textsuperscript{18} *GIRM*, 118c, 139, 142.

\textsuperscript{19} *GIRM*, 118.
Disposal of Worn Altar Linens
Consistent with the disposal of all things blessed for use in the liturgy, it is appropriate that altar linens, which show signs of wear and can no longer be used, should normally be disposed of either by burial or burning.

Conclusion
The manner in which we treat sacred things (even those of lesser significance than the chalice, paten, liturgical furnishings, etc.) fosters and expresses our openness to the graces God gives to his Church in every celebration of the Eucharist. Thus, by the diligent care of altar linens, the Church expresses her joy at the inestimable gifts she receives from Christ's altar.