

No One Ritual Size Fits All: An Adequate Repertoire

Michael Weldon, O.F.M., D. Min. has written a book regarding ritual, prayer and parish closure. Entitled, *A Struggle for Holy Ground: Reconciliation and the rites of Parish Closure*, he includes sample prayer services for many of the times in the journey of a parish towards closing or merging or resisting an unjust decision. Two of the prayer services are reprinted in the packet with the permission of Liturgical Press. Below is an excerpt from an article he wrote for *New Theology Review* describing some of the rituals that could be used for a parish closing.

Rituals for Closure (Excerpt by Fr. Michael Weldon, used with permission)

A bishop initiates a parish; and a bishop is key to a parish's decision to merge, close, or re-image itself. The presence of the bishop to accompany and attend to the leadership- in particular the pastors- has been often overlooked in local planning processes. The *Rite of Dedication of a Church and an Altar*, for which the local bishop is the ordinary presider, is one of the most elaborate of the church's repertoire after the Easter Vigil. Yet, when a church closes and/or is assumed into another configuration, there is no officially approved rite. All that is required canonically is a declaration of the local ordinary to the fact. In the past decades many parish churches have been closed with nothing more than a bishop's declaration, final Mass, and reception. This lacks a certain ritual logic. If a series of rituals dedicate a parish church, many rites are needed to close one as well.

However, not one order of ritual fits all. An urban Midwest parish wanted thanksgiving to characterize their final act together as a local Christian community, not the proposed funeral-like liturgies. Yet force-feeding gratitude to a community of worshipers before they are ready is a great imposition. Another parish was so conflicted and overwhelmed with loss and anger at those responsible for the decision for closure that a funeral-like ritual was the most appropriate way to say good-bye. The work of shaping appropriate and effective rites to the reconfiguring of local church will require skilled pastoral ministers with an extensive repertoire of rituals that express their careful attention to local needs.

Interviews in closed parishes in both Chicago and San Francisco highlighted the need for a series of ritual moments. Some of the prominent ministers of these rites have been the local bishops themselves. These moments included: (1) conflict, impasse, and reconciliation within the consolidation processes themselves; (2) the experience of parish closure; (3) leave-taking of a parish building; (4) inauguration of a newly consolidated parish; and (5) anniversary and ongoing remembrance (*FDLC Newsletter*, 49-53).

The desire for "honest ritual" and nonmanipulative pastoral care emerge repeatedly from interviews and recent literature on parish closures as key recommendations by survivors of parochial reshaping for those just beginning. Adequate time to grieve the loss of autonomy with its web of relationships and identity was also a repeated call. Here are ten ritual stations developed from liturgies parishes crafted over the past few decades for closing and consolidation. These moments of ritual are simply places to stand to look backward and forward across a community's life. They have resonances to both pre- and post-dedication liturgies and have not emerged in any order of preference.

1. The Reserved Sacrament

The ritual of translation of the Eucharist from the Mass of the Lord's Supper in the Triduum was a familiar rite adapted by parish and diocesan liturgy teams for the rituals of church closure, most particularly for the rite of leave-taking from a church building. Processions with the Eucharist and its sanctuary lamp, together with other prominent symbols from a worship space (processional cross, paschal candle, oils, and Gospel Book) served as a final act of leave-taking (Wuest, 71).

2. "The Relics" and the Patron Saint of the Parish

The "relics of a church" are often more than just the relic(s) of a patron saint. In addition to the those encased in the altar stones, gifts of furnishings, stained-glass windows, vesture, bells, and even machinery-like heating and sound systems often times have a story. Transition rituals need to give people an opportunity and adequate time to tell these stories. The passing over of the keys, registry books, and the principal icon of the patron saint to the receiving parish, accompanied with traditional hymns, orations, and storytelling, offers healing and closure (Dorsch, 33-34).

3. Icons and Devotions

Devotional art and iconography in the church have great ties to the immigrant story of many American Catholic churches. One parish used a ritualized inventory process to collect its sacred art, giving parishioners a chance to remember the devotions like May Crowning, Our Lady of Perpetual Help, St. Anthony devotions, and the Stations of the Cross.

Remembering those who gave the images and articulating gratitude for their value and history has been a way of reducing the sense of violation and invasion often articulated by some.

4. The Main Altar

A stripping of the altar (another familiar moment from the Triduum) together with ritual washing can provide a solemn leave-taking event that can involve many people. Removing the altar linens and washing the altar- even pouring the water used into the sacrarium- provides a way to contain hurtful past memories, even skeletons in the closets. A sung *Kyrie eleison* with incense rising from a brazier on the altar (much in the way that it was dedicated) can be a way of further making peace with end of a great era of church. A reverencing or kissing of the altar by the whole assembly (as does the presider at the beginning and end of every Eucharist) has been employed for leave-taking from the center of its ritual life.

5. The Walls and Pulpit

A washing of the walls and ambo has been suggested as a way to extend the cleansing of a community's memories. If the church was consecrated, the twelve crosses on the inside walls and the two on the posts of the main entrance could be removed or washed and the water used poured into the sacrarium. A ritual washing of the ambo or podium by lectors or a Bible-study group could be a further opportunity to give thanks for the preached Word and to beg healing for the word that harmed, manipulated, or divided.

6. The Place of Funerals

Remembering the deceased best takes place in the center front of the church where coffins were shrouded for funeral Masses. The registers of interments, vesture, funeral palls, incense pots, and vessels for holy water should also be employed in the rites. Other suggestions include: a series of Masses for those buried from the parish, memorial prayer cards, or even a stone marker in the nearby Catholic cemetery.

7. Baptismal Font

A closing blessing of the assembly from the baptismal font and a song of praise, most especially in a singing once again of the Litany of the Saints, attends to another level of a parish's identity. One parish sang a litany of the names of all those baptized from the parish's history. The confessionals, as the place of reconciliation, need to be honored in some way as well. Locating this recognition near the font speaks of baptism and the renewal of baptismal promises.

8. Lighting

The church was blessed with a solemn illumination as part of its dedication. Taking leave with only the light of the paschal candle- the other candles in the church having been extinguished in a solemn way- speaks of an accompanying God who walks with the chosen people wherever they go.

9. The Doors

The closing and sealing of the church's principal doors offers a powerful sense of almost reverent finale. After the 1989 California earthquake, the closing of the Oakland cathedral was conducted on the steps outside the front doors. The declaration of closure by Bishop John Cummins in front of the sealed doors was a powerful ending to the rite. The opening of the door is one of the principal steps of the rites of dedication. It is fitting that the doors figure in the final ritual moment in the closure of a worship site.

10. The Principle Cross

Removing the crucifix can be a special focus of reverence during the final days of a parish's life. Carrying the principal cross to the receiving parish or to the building of the newly consolidated church is a powerful transitions rite. The fixing of a permanent memorial at some suitable place on a closing building can anchor to memory the once sacred character of the place. A permanent memorial or shrine, even at another locale, could serve as a locus for ongoing grief and the celebration of anniversaries (Weldon, 127-130).

Weldon, Michael. "Folding Up the Tents": Catholic Imagination and Rites of Church Closure." *New Theology Review*. May 2006. pp. 23-32. (Used with permission)



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