

GIRM Question and Answer No. 1

Q. I went to Mass in a different church and saw many statues and paintings depicting different saints, there were even duplicates of some saints. They were all near the front of the church near the sanctuary and I found this quite distracting. I remember when the many statues were moved around away from the sanctuary after Vatican II and I wonder what the documents say now?

What do the Church Documents say?

Sacred Images

General Instruction of the Roman Missal #318

In the earthly Liturgy, the Church participates, by a foretaste, in that heavenly Liturgy which is celebrated in the holy city of Jerusalem, toward which she journeys as a pilgrim, and where Christ is seated at the right hand of God; and by venerating the memory of the Saints, she hopes one day to have some share and fellowship with them.

Thus, in sacred buildings images of the Lord, of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and of the Saints, in accordance with most ancient tradition of the Church, should be displayed for veneration by the faithful and should be so arranged so as to lead the faithful toward the mysteries of faith celebrated there. Care should, therefore, 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.¹³⁴ There should usually be only one image of any given Saint. Generally speaking, in the ornamentation and arrangement of a church, as far as images are concerned, provision should be made for the devotion of the entire community as well as for the beauty and dignity of the images.

Sacred Images

Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy # 125.

The practice of placing sacred images in churches so that they may be venerated by the faithful is to be maintained. Nevertheless their number should be moderate and their relative positions should reflect right order. For otherwise they may create confusion among the Christian people and foster devotion of doubtful orthodoxy.

Sacred Images

Built of Living Stones #137 #138

The placement of images can be a challenge, especially when a number of cultural traditions are part of a single parish community and each has its own devotional life and practices. Restraint in the number and prominence of sacred images¹⁵⁶ is encouraged to help people focus on the liturgical action that is celebrated in the church. Separate alcoves for statues or icons can display a variety of images through the year. Some parishes designate an area as the shrine for an image that is being venerated on a given day or for a period of time, such as the image of a saint on his or her feast day.

It is important that the images in the church depict saints for whom devotion currently exists in the parish. It is particularly desirable that a significant image of the patron of the church be fittingly displayed, as well as an image of Mary, the Mother of God, as a fitting tribute to her unique role in the plan of salvation. As time passes and demographics change, saints who were once the object of veneration by many parishioners may at another time be venerated by only a few. When this happens, these images could be removed, provided sensitivity is shown with regard to the piety of the faithful and the impact on the building.

In summary

Sacred images should be placed in the church as to not distract from the focus of the liturgical action on the sanctuary. They should be few in number and not repeated. As time passes and as a community's devotions change they too may need to change.

