

# “Art of Our Own Days”

## Media Art as Liturgical Art

BY EILEEN D. CROWLEY



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 . . . *The art of our own days, coming from every race and region, shall also be given free scope in the Church . . .*

*Sacrosanctum Concilium, Constitution on the Liturgy, 123, emphasis added*

Outside of the Church, photography has long been accepted as “art of our own days.” Yet few Catholic churches have experimented with photography as potential liturgical art. I find this odd. When my classmates and I prepared liturgies in our high school chapel in the late 1960s, we naturally included photographs that served as liturgical art for our meditation. What happened to that instinct?

Historically, I suspect, a post-liturgical reform pull-back on liturgical experimentation in Catholic worship was a factor. Another factor evidently is the proliferation and massive influence of the use of media arts in evangelical Protestant preaching services. That model of media in worship—as audiovisual presentation technology—began in the late 1970s with experiments by evangelical churches, some of which eventually grew into what became “megachurches,” such as Willow Creek outside of Chicago. Seeing the success of these churches in attracting people, other Protestant churches, even those of medium size, gradually followed “the program” of using graphics, video, and multimedia along with hip pastors dressed in jeans, a praise band, and comfy

seating in auditorium “black box” spaces without windows where projection is possible any time of day.

By the 1990s, some Catholic churches started importing the Protestant preaching-service use of projected lyrics, texts, graphics, and video for communication purposes: to convey information, to encourage participation, and to reinforce or enrich oral communication. This importation of the megachurch model seemed to make sense to some church leaders, especially for projecting song lyrics. Unfortunately, media projection in worship for the sole purpose of visual display of texts or graphics is a very limited understanding of the potential of media art in worship, this “art of our own days.”

Why does this matter? Because photography *can* become worthy liturgical art. It can serve as media art of meditation or as media art that serves as environmental art. Photography can bring beauty into the worship space in new and unexpected ways. Unfortunately, most churches have yet to appreciate or even to consider this form of art as *art*, equal in dignity and potential to other forms of visual liturgical art long ago fully accepted

in our churches. However, photography, when it is fittingly and appropriately integrated into worship in a way that respects the form of liturgy within which it appears, can be *liturgical media art*, a term I coined decades ago. And herein lies an opportunity mostly unexplored by church leaders and worship committees in Catholic parishes over the past fifty years.

### Let’s Learn from Media Installation Artists

Liturgy teams can develop an appreciation for the potential of liturgical media art, especially of photography, by experiencing the works of professional media installation artists who have been working in diverse settings with diverse forms of media since the 1960s, when *Sacrosanctum Concilium* first encouraged the churches to welcome “art of our own days” into local liturgical spaces. Seek out media artists within your own community and invite them to help you see the possibilities of liturgical media art installations within your own worship space, devotional spaces, or even out of doors on the walls of your church!



Photo: Media arts installations,  
All Saints Episcopal Church, Chicago

Since the 1960s, media installation artists have demonstrated how to display photographs and video in a variety of creative ways beyond simple projection onto a screen. Three artists in particular can inspire churches to imagine, to experiment, and to explore different options in the projection or display of images in any worship space: Nam June Paik, Bill Viola, and Diana Thater. Permit me to share how we might translate the methods of these media installation artists in our own devotional and worship spaces.

- *Media art for devotional spaces:* Nam June Paik often created assemblages of TV monitors with changing images related to a particular theme. His work might inspire us create a November display of photographs of departed loved ones on a wall, on a video screen or screens, or even via a cluster of laptops or e-tablets on a table in an alcove or shrine area.
- *Media art and fabric:* Bill Viola has provided a method of media art installation that can work in worship spaces where people are all arranged around an altar, a very difficult space

for typical media projection. Long ago, though, Viola demonstrated that sheer hanging fabric can provide surfaces for projection. Voile fabric, for example, creatively arranged and hung from church rafters in the center of the worship space, can allow an image to pass through the fabric so that people can see the image no matter where they are sitting.

- *Media art and architecture:* Diana Thater has projected onto architectural features and has created intimate spaces people can enter for contemplation. She does not hesitate to project video onto floors, walls, and ceilings at odd angles, but not just to confuse or to be different. Following her example, we might use our own church architecture—such as a light-colored apse—onto which we might project a single Hubble space image during the Christmas Eve liturgy to remind us that “the heavens are telling the glory of God,” too. Or, for a small group’s Night Prayer held in a chapel or chancel space, we might transform the environment through a single photograph of a field of stars

projected onto the space’s ceiling. With the proper projector and sufficient distance, even a large swath of a church’s walls can be transformed by a single image of green foliage, so that people may feel enveloped by nature as they pray for all of creation or seek the peace that even photos of nature can bring.

### Why Is This Approach Different?

You will notice that my examples often include the projection of *just one image*. If it is a relevant, well-composed photograph appropriately selected for the liturgy, one image might be held for the whole liturgy (for example, a local sunset for Evening Prayer) or be used only during one part of a service. The common practice of having new images for every part of a service pushes people to use photographs that may be too literal, of poor quality, or just inappropriate. Think quality, not quantity. Also, I am only encouraging *occasional use of photography* when it can contribute something to the liturgy that would otherwise not be possible in any other way.

I am also urging liturgy teams to *experiment initially in low-risk situations* such as Night Prayer. Learning to create liturgical media art installations takes time, imagination, and much collaboration. You will only learn what works in your particular context by trial and error. And sometimes technology will fail you! So be prepared. Nonetheless, in my experience, working with others to develop liturgical media art installations with photography is worth the time and effort. After all, it is one “art of our own days.” Why not give it a try?

---

Dr. Eileen Crowley is Associate Professor of Liturgy, Art, and Communications at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. She has published many essays on this topic, as well as two books: *A Moving Word: Media Art in Worship* (Minneapolis MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2006) and *Liturgical Art for a Media Culture* (Collegetown MN: Liturgical Press, 2007).