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## Rituals for Closing a Parish Church

This document includes excerpts from

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by Thomas G. Simons, Liturgy Training Publications

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The rite proposed by the Columbus diocese consists of a procession to the major stations in the church: the font, the reconciliation chapel, shrine areas, the ambo and altar. It is presumed that the tabernacle has been emptied in preparation for the closing, so no ritual recognition is provided. The tone and character of the entire rite should be one of thanksgiving for this place that has served to gather God's people together in sacramental encounter with God.

Several representatives of the assembly accept ritual objects that will be transferred to a new place of worship. These objects, such as a sacred vessel, an image or icon, a book of the gospels, and so forth, should be thoughtfully determined beforehand. The objects may be received during the procession as it makes its way through the church or they may be placed near the final station or the altar. It is important to arrange in advance with the new parish's leadership that whatever accompanies the people to the new parish will be received with respect and put to use there.

One adaptation of the rite is to provide some form of sharing of memories at each station. People can be invited to say the names or tell the stories of those who were baptized, reconciled, married or buried from this place. Some spontaneous sharing might also be provided for. The feasibility of this will depend on the size and nature of the assembly. The presider must carefully and sensitively coordinate the flow of these remembrances and gracefully bring them to closure so that the service is not unduly prolonged, especially when it is within the eucharistic celebration. The presider might add the invocation "And so we say, Blessed be God for ever!" after each remembrance, long or short. All would respond, "Blessed be God for ever!"

### **For the Closing of a Church**

After the people have gathered, the introductory rites begin in the usual way. Following the greeting, the presider says these or similar words:

As we celebrate the eucharist here today for the last time, let us enter with full hearts into thanksgiving for the gifts of God and the grace of this place.

The rite of blessing and sprinkling of the people with holy water may take place as a renewal of baptism and as a reminder of the sprinkling of the church at its dedication. During the preparation of gifts, both the gifts and the people are incensed, reminiscent of the dedication liturgy.

Following the prayer after communion, the presider says these or similar words:

Blessed are you, Emmanuel, God with us. In this place we have come to know and celebrate your love for us, your people. We trust in your providential care for us and your guidance to our true and lasting home. Be with us now and always and so we say, "Blessed be God for ever!"

All respond: Blessed be God for ever!

The presider then says:

As we leave this place of worship, we give thanks to God for all the blessings we have received here.

If possible, all join in a procession for remembering. Adapt the route according to the layout of the building, but the procession should end at the altar. Sing during the procession, using Psalm 90 ("You have been our haven, Lord, from generation to generation"), another psalm of thanksgiving or a well-known hymn of thanks or praise. If it is not possible for all to join the procession, invite all to turn in the direction of the prayer and sing between each thanksgiving. Candle bearers lead the procession to the various areas.

At the font the presider says:

Let us remember the baptisms celebrated here (pause for silence). We thank you and we praise you for the life of faith to all who have passed through the waters of new life at this font. Blessed be God for ever!

All respond: Blessed be God for ever!

At the confessional or reconciliation chapel, the presider says:

Let us remember the times when we have been forgiven, comforted, consoled in the sacrament of penance (pause for silence). We thank you and we praise you for the healing and reconciling love that has been given through the sacrament of penance in this church. Blessed be God for ever!

All respond: Blessed be God for ever!

At a station of the cross, at a significant statue or icon, or at a shrine (repeat as desired), the presider says:

Let us remember the generations of prayer and devotion that this sacred image has inspired (pause for silence). We thank you for inspiring in us here true devotion to (the way of the cross; Blessed Mother Mary, Saint . . .) Blessed be God for ever!

All respond: Blessed be God for ever!

At the ambo, the presider says:

Let us remember the power of God's word proclaimed here in scripture and in preaching (pause for silence). We thank you and we praise you for your holy word proclaimed here in faith and preached here in sincerity. May it echo always in our hearts. Blessed be God for ever!

All respond: Blessed be God for ever!



Finally, at the altar, the presider says:

Let us remember the times we have gathered for the sacred banquet: the Triduum kept each year, the Sundays on which we worshiped faithfully, the first communion celebrations, the feast days of saints and martyrs, the marriages witnessed here, the funerals held here in hope. Let us pray (pause for silence). God our refuge, our home is in you. You are greater than any temple, church or cathedral that can be built by human hands, yet in this place we have met your divine presence. This church building has been a place of blessing for us. Protect us on our way. Lead us to a new assembly of your faithful people. We ask this through Christ our Lord.

All respond: Amen.

If the entire community is being transferred to another church, delegate one or more members (for example, the president of the pastoral council, the eldest member of the parish or the youngest) to carry an object (or objects) that will be used in the new place (such as a sacred vessel, an icon or the book of the gospels). If there are relics that have been removed from the altar, these may also be carried out. The presider presents the delegated persons with the objects they will carry, and says:

The life of this community will continue in another place. (Name), receive this (name of item) that will be used at (name of the new church). Take it (directly) from this place to (name of the new pastor/pastoral administrator) as a sign that our journey of faith will continue there.

The final blessing may be taken from among the solemn blessings found in the sacramentary at 12, 13 or 14.

During the singing of the final hymn, all may be invited to come forward and kiss the altar or offer a profound bow as a final gesture of leave-taking. The final hymn could be "Now thank we all our God," "Holy God we praise thy Name," a hymn in honor of the parish titular, or something familiar. All process out of the building.

A similar ritual was developed by the parish of St. Paschal Baylon in Oakland, California, when their church was closed for renovation ("Rite of farewell for a church," *Modern Liturgy Magazine*, September 1995). This ritual could also be adapted to local circumstances.

The presider, at the beginning of the liturgy, addresses the assembly:

My sisters and brothers, we gather together today in this space that has formed us as church and in which we have celebrated the mysteries of our faith. We begin the liturgy remembering that we are on a journey, a pilgrimage that leads us one day to the banquet table of heaven.

In addition to remembering and giving thanks for some of the specific symbols and spaces mentioned above, the sick who were anointed in this church were also recognized with prayer:

We hear the prayers for healing and remember those sick who have come here for comfort, who with the oil of strength have been anointed in this place.

At the altar the presider says:

And most especially, we remember our celebration of the Lord's Supper. We hear music and see gestures. We recall breaking open the Word, eating the Bread, drinking the Cup. God has indeed offered God's self to us and we have offered ourselves to God and one another in this place. Let us bless the Lord.

All respond: Thanks be to God.

After the final blessing, the presider says:

Let us now take a few moments within the silence of our own hearts to thank God for our worship here and to say "farewell" to this sacred space as we have known it.

After a few moments of silence, the musicians begin the accompaniment to "What is this place?" A procession is formed with members of the assembly gathering symbols and various liturgical artifacts to be carried out of the building. As the procession moves forward all join in singing, "What is this place?"

Sometimes a ritual or service of closure may more appropriately take place within a service of prayer apart from Mass. Such was the occasion when the Cathedral of St. Francis de Sales in Oakland, California, was closed in 1993 (see Thomas G. Simons, "Requiem for a Church: Closing St. Francis de Sales Cathedral," *Environment and Art Letter*, April 1994). The building was heavily damaged by an earthquake in 1989. Costly repairs proved unfeasible.

The assembly gathered in front of the church. A large wooden cross used during the Triduum was at the center of the environment, along with banners and bells. A sound system was provided along with musical instruments to lead the assembly with music.

After the assembly sang the Taizé version of "Veni Sancte Spiritus," Bishop John Cummins greeted the assembly and prayed:

Most merciful God, whose wisdom is beyond our understanding, surround our family of St. Francis de Sales with your love, so that we may not be overwhelmed by our loss. Let us find comfort in our sadness, certainty in



our doubt, courage to live through this hour, and strength to meet the days to come.

Among the readings chosen was a passage from the Book of Revelation (21:1–5, 6–7) which speaks of God’s dwelling place among people, a God who comforts and makes all things new, a God who is the beginning and end of all things. Following the homily and a period of silent reflection, the bishop said:

Here we and those who have gone before us have celebrated our joys and sorrows. In this church we have encountered Jesus Christ in word, sacraments and one another. But now, after 100 years of faith, it is my sad duty to close the Cathedral of St. Francis de Sales this day. In Christ’s name I now do so.

The bishop closed the church’s open doors and locked them. The doors that had opened wide for years in welcome were closed for the last time. Intercessions followed, sung between choir and people. There followed several brief, eulogy-like reflections, offered by representative members of the parish. At times the comments brought forth applause, laughter and tears from the assembly.

The bishop concluded by saying:

With thanks for the good accomplished here, I declare this Cathedral of St. Francis de Sales now closed.

He offered the blessing and all sang, “O God our help in ages past.”

Everyone received a memento of the occasion: a picture of the cathedral with historical dates and the date of closure. In other places a videotape of the last liturgy in the church was made available or a special booklet of the parish’s history with photographs. All these serve as ongoing remembrances of the community that gathered in these places.

Likewise, the diocese of Harrisburg developed “Rituals of Transition” when faced with the closure and merging of a large number of parishes in 1995. The format they offered suggests a last week of events in the church being closed.

At the Sunday liturgy inaugurating the final week of prayer in the church, after the blessing and dismissal, the assembly comes forward with tapers or candles and receives light from the paschal candle, held by the presider. The litany of the saints, including the name of the parish patron, is sung by the assembly as all process out of the building with the presider leading them with the paschal candle.

During the week between the closing liturgy of the former parish and the first liturgy in the new parish, a vigil celebration or celebrations take place. These may either take the form of evening prayer from the Liturgy of the Hours or a liturgy of the word. At each service, the presider enters the assembly carrying the paschal candle. After the reading, the priest or deacon gives a homily, focusing with hope on

the future. During the singing of the gospel canticle of evening prayer, the altar, paschal candle and people are incensed. Before the final blessing, a member or members of the community may be invited to offer remembrances about the parish. The paschal candle remains in its place throughout the week, and is lighted during other liturgies that take place. The sung litany of the saints accompanies the recession at each service.

One of the vigil celebrations during that last week might employ a telling of the parish history. After a liturgy of the word, names of members of the parish could be read from the baptismal register, perhaps those who were baptized during the first year of the parish's existence and those who were baptized during the final year, along with some anecdotes by pastor or parishioners. After a group of names is recited, an acclamation (such as the Taizé "Jesus, remember me, when you come into your Kingdom") could be sung. A reflection on the sacrament of baptism could be given, perhaps by a parishioner who helps with baptismal preparation. The same could be done with other sacramental registers.

This type of celebration requires careful preparation but would be a way of telling the parish story and allowing good memories to accompany the parishioners during this time of closure, transition and merger.

Other recommended celebrations during the final week include exposition and benediction of the blessed sacrament, a celebration in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary or of the patron saint of the closing parish. It is recommended that the church be made available to parishioners for visitation as much as possible during the week of closing. They should be afforded the opportunity to savor its beauty, images, atmosphere.

On the day of the opening of the newly combined parish, all gather outside the new parish church, if circumstances permit. The liturgy may begin outside the worship space with a gathering hymn. Representatives from each of the former parishes should be involved in the opening procession and ministries of the liturgy. Name tags should be made available and worn by all. The paschal candle is used in place of the processional cross. Vessels of water, one from each of the former parishes, are carried in.

After the gathering hymn, the bishop's decree establishing the new parish is read by the pastor. The litany of the saints, using the names of the former patrons and the new patron, is sung as the procession into the church or to the altar begins. During the procession, symbols and liturgical artifacts that will be used in the new parish may be carried into the church and placed in appropriate settings.

After the greeting, water from each former parish community is called forth, combined into one vessel, blessed and sprinkled. The litany of the saints may continue during the sprinkling, or another familiar acclamation may be sung. The Gloria is also sung. In the homily, the presider expresses the hope of going forward together with gratitude for the past.





After communion, the blessed sacrament chapel is inaugurated.

During the preparation of gifts, the gifts and the assembly are incensed. Following the prayer after communion, the new pastor expresses thanks to those who assisted in the process of transition. A solemn blessing from the sacramentary (such as no. 11) is recommended. A festive hymn accompanies the recessional, with the new pastor and pastoral leaders leading the assembly from the tables of word and sacrament to tables of fellowship at a reception.

When St. Sebastian church on Chicago's near north side burned in 1990, parishioners gathered for a church closing ceremony to terminate their 78-year-old parish (see Bishop William McManus, "A Funeral for a Parish," *Liturgy* 90, February/March 1991). They assembled outside the church building and were greeted by auxiliary bishop Timothy Lyne, representing Chicago's archbishop, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin.

He said:

Here you and those who have gone before you have celebrated your joys and sorrows. In this church you have encountered Jesus Christ in word, sacraments and one another. But now, after 78 years of faith, circumstances require this damaged church to be closed. It is Cardinal Bernardin's sad duty to close these church doors. In his name I now do so.



The doors were closed and two parishioners then sealed the church doors with a purple ribbon.

A procession formed that led to the parish school's auditorium next door. At the end of the procession the pastor carried a simple cross that for years had been mounted over the church entrance. Its only ornamentation for this liturgy was a crown of thorns.

In the penitential rite at the beginning of the Mass, the parishioners asked God's healing for their bitterness and frustration during the meetings, marches and demonstrations they held in hopes of saving their parish despite the necessity of a large-scale reordering of the archdiocese. A Gloria, led by the choir, helped the congregation shift its mood from sorrow and regret to joy and hope.

The homily radiated hope and optimism about the future. Rather than being a recital of the parish's history, it was a message encouraging trust in God's providence. After the homily, the pastor led the assembly in a recommitment to Christian life. He blessed water in the parish's baptismal font (saved from the burned building) and invited the parishioners to dip their hands into the water, bless themselves and profess their continued faith in Jesus Christ and his gospel.

At the preparation of the altar and gifts, in addition to the bread and wine, the holy oils used for the sacraments of baptism, confirmation and anointing of the sick were presented, as well as the parish sacramental register holding the names of all who had received the sacraments of initiation and all whose funerals were celebrated in the parish church. The sign of peace was a farewell for many who no longer would be together in this community. During the liturgy's concluding rites, the following litany was offered:

Leader: Whenever we eat this eucharistic bread and wine we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Pastor: Whatever table we gather around may we be reminded of the love we have shared around this one.

Leader: The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

Pastor: May we always be open to God's word; it challenges us to justice and comforts us with hope.

Leader: (holding the paschal candle) Jesus said: "I am the light of the world."

Pastor: May we share the light of our faith with our new parishes. You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people.

The bishop then approved the official proclamation by the deacon: "With thanks to God for the good accomplished here, this parish of St. Sebastian is now closed." The congregation concluded with singing.

Places hold special meaning for human beings. Churches in particular are places where conversion is celebrated and redemption is actively encountered. Church buildings become a locus of human community, a treasury for stories and lives. It is fitting, then, that if we initiate a building before we use it, that we also offer a thanksgiving or funeral liturgy for a place that will no longer be used. Given the mobility of society, Christians will need to learn how to ritualize the closing of a church building. Such rituals are instrumental in helping all to give thanks and remember.



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