

Altars of Repose

Our Roman Missal instructs that after the Holy Thursday service, we are to process with the Blessed Sacrament to the place of reposition prepared in a chapel suitably decorated for the occasion. This is known as an Altar of Repose where the faithful are encouraged to “continue in prayer according to local circumstance.” The tradition of the Altar of Repose spans centuries and continents.

One way to pray on this night is to visit seven Altars of Repose at seven different churches. This tradition, begun by St. Philip Neri, was a practice that encouraged reflection on the seven places or “stations” Jesus went between the Upper Room and his Crucifixion. Pilgrims are to reflect on one station at each church they visit. When I lived in Los Angeles in grad school, my friends warmly referred to this tradition as “Altar Hopping.” What I find most beautiful about these altars is that they are all unique, and often provide insights into the unique culture of the parish being visited. In my years of altar hopping, I have visited altars representing Polish, African American, Latino, Czech, Greek, Byzantine, and Filipino cultures. And each altar is distinctive to its community.

When we designed our Altar of Repose this year, we took care to represent both the spirit of this night, and the mission of our church, St. Matthew’s.

The interior design of our Altar represents classic images of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, the “first station” after the upper room. Our Altar will be surrounded by plants and flowers, and a rainbow of color will flow down from the sky to symbolize the angels who tended to Jesus in his Agony. At the beginning of Lent, we heard how Jesus went out into the desert where he was tempted by Satan.

The garden itself is a powerful symbol – where our creation story begins – the Garden of Eden. The Garden is the place where we lived in communion with God. But when Adam and Eve disobeyed God, we lost that close connection to our Creator. After Noah and the flood, God sent a rainbow and promised that God would never destroy us. So, God made covenants with prophets. God anointed Priests and Kings. But God’s people still struggled to understand God’s love. And God realized, we needed a mediator, a bridge builder, a garden keeper with the key to the door of the garden, to bring us to the Garden and let us in. Jesus suffered in a garden so that He could bring us all back into the garden of

God’s presence. And so, our altar uses the rainbow of color to represent Christ, our mediator of salvation.

The design outside of our chapel represents the mission of our church, to be a visible expression of God’s love, and our motto, to be the Good Samaritan on the banks of the

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Mississippi. Our church believes in practicing the Corporal Works of Mercy. So, outside our chapel you will read these very important words of Christ: "Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine you did for me." And all who enter our chapel will be reminded that Christ did not come to earth to reside in a tent. Our time of vigil and prayer calls us out into the world to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the ill, visit the prisoners, bury the dead, and give to the poor.

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