

Dedication of the Altar

St. Francis Xavier Church, Mississauga ON
May 3, 2023 By His Excellency Bishop Ivan Camilleri



I

THE NATURE AND DIGNITY OF THE ALTAR

The early Fathers of the Church, meditating on the Word of God, did not hesitate to assert that Christ was the Victim, the Priest, and the Altar of his own Sacrifice.

For in the Letter to the Hebrews, Christ is presented as the great High Priest who is also the living Altar of the heavenly Temple, furthermore, in the Book of Revelation our Redeemer appears as the Lamb that has been slain, whose offering is borne by the hands of the holy Angel to the altar on high.

THE CHRISTIAN IS ALSO A SPIRITUAL ALTAR

Since Christ, Head and Teacher, is the true Altar, his members and disciples are also spiritual altars on which the sacrifice of a life lived in holiness is offered to God. This is what the Fathers themselves seem to indicate: Saint Ignatius of Antioch asks the Romans quite plainly: "Grant me nothing more than to be offered as a sacrifice to God, while there is still an altar ready." Saint Polycarp exhorts widows to live in holiness for "they are God's altar." To these voices the voice of still others, including that of Saint Gregory the Great, reply. He teaches: "What is God's altar if not the soul of those who lead good lives?... Rightly then, the heart (of the just) is said to be the altar of God."

Or, according to another image frequently used by the writers of the Church, the Christian faithful who make time for prayer, who offer petitions to God and make sacrifices of supplication, are themselves living stones

from which the Lord Jesus builds the altar of the Church."

THE ALTAR, THE TABLE OF THE SACRIFICE AND OF THE PASCHAL BANQUET

When Christ the Lord instituted in the form of a sacrificial banquet a memorial of the Sacrifice he was about to offer the Father on the altar of the Cross, he made holy the table where the faithful would come to celebrate their Passover. Therefore, the altar is the table of the Sacrifice and of the banquet at which the Priest representing Christ the Lord, does what the Lord himself did and what he handed on to his disciples to do in his memory. The Apostle clearly speaks of all these things when he says: "The blessing cup that we bless, is it not a communion with the Blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a communion with the Body of Christ? Because there is only one bread, we though many are one body, for we all have a share in the one bread.

THE ALTAR, A SIGN OF CHRIST

Everywhere, in varying circumstances, the Church's sons and daughters can celebrate the memorial of Christ and take their place at the Lord's table. Nevertheless, it is in keeping with the eucharistic mystery that the Christian faithful should erect a stable altar for celebrating the Lord's Supper, something that has been done from the earliest times.

The Christian altar is by its very nature a unique table of sacrifice and of the paschal banquet:

- ◆ a unique altar on which the Sacrifice of the Cross is perpetuated in mystery throughout the ages until Christ comes;
- ◆ a table at which the Church's sons and daughters are gathered to give thanks to God and to receive the Body and Blood of Christ.

In every church, then, the altar is "the centre of the thanksgiving that is accomplished through the Eucharist" around which the Church's other rites are, in a certain manner, ordered.

Because it is at the altar that the memorial of the Lord is celebrated and his Body and Blood given to the faithful, it came to pass that the Church's writers see in the altar a sign of Christ himself - hence the saying arose: "The altar is Christ."

THE ALTAR, HONOUR OF THE MARTYRS

The entire dignity of an altar consists in the fact that the altar is the table of the Lord. It is not, then, the bodies of the Martyrs that give honour to the altar, but rather it is the altar that renders the burial place of the Martyrs worthy of honour. For to honour the bodies of the Martyrs and other Saints and to signify that the sacrifice of the members has its source in the Sacrifice of the Head, it is fitting for altars to be constructed over their tombs or for their relics to be placed under altars, so that "the triumphant victims may occupy the place where Christ is the sacrificial victim: he, however, who suffered for all, upon the altar; they, who have been redeemed by his Passion, under the altar." This arrangement would seem to recall in a certain manner the spiritual vision of the Apostle John in the Book of Revelation: "I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the Word of God and for the witness they have given." For, although all the Saints are rightly called Christ's witnesses, the witness of blood, nonetheless, has a special strength, to which only the relics of Martyrs deposited under the altar give complete and perfect expression.

II THE BUILDING OF AN ALTAR

It is desirable that in every church there be a fixed altar; but in other places set aside for sacred celebrations the altar may be either fixed or movable. An altar is said to be fixed if it is constructed as to be attached to the floor and not removable; it is said to be movable if it can be displaced.

In new churches it is preferable to erect only a single altar, so that in the one assembly of the faithful the one altar may be a sign of our one Saviour Jesus Christ and the one Eucharist of the Church.

Nonetheless, in a chapel, if possible separated to a certain extent from the main body of the church where the tabernacle for the reservation of the Most Blessed Sacrament is situated, another altar may be erected where Mass also can be celebrated on weekdays for a small assembly of the faithful.

The erection of several altars in a church merely for the sake of adornment must be entirely avoided.

The altar should be built separate from the wall, in such a way that the Priest can easily walk around it and celebrate Mass facing the people, "The altar should occupy a place where it is truly the centre to which the attention of the whole congregation of the faithful naturally turns."

In keeping with the Church's traditional practice and the biblical symbolism connected with an altar, the table of a fixed altar should be of stone, and indeed of natural stone. However, other dignified, solid and well-crafted material may also be used for the construction of an altar, according to the judgment of the Conference of Bishops.

As to the supports or base for supporting the table, these may be made of any material, provided it is dignified and solid.

The altar by its very nature is dedicated to the one God, for the Eucharistic Sacrifice is offered to the one God. It is in this sense that the Church's custom of dedicating altars to God in honour of the Saints must be understood. Saint Augustine expresses it well: "It is not to any of the Martyrs, but to the very God of the Martyrs, albeit in memory of the Martyrs, that we raise our altars."

This must be made clear to the faithful. In new churches statues and pictures of Saints may not be placed above the altar. Likewise, relics of Saints should not be placed on the table of the altar when they are exposed for the veneration of the people.

The tradition of the Roman Liturgy of placing relics of Martyrs or of other Saints under the altar is fittingly to be retained. Nevertheless, the following should be noted:

- a) Relics intended for deposition should be of such a size that they can be recognized as parts of human bodies. Hence, enclosing excessively small relics of one or more Saints is to be avoided.
- b) The greatest care must be taken to determine whether relics intended for deposition are authentic. It is better for an altar to be dedicated without relics than to have relics of doubtful authenticity deposited under it.
- c) A reliquary must not be placed on the altar or in the table of the altar but under the table of the altar, in a manner suitable to the design of the altar.

When the rite of the deposition of the relics takes place, it is highly recommended to celebrate a vigil in the presence of the relics of the Martyr or Saint, in accordance with the provisions of Chapter II, no. 10.

III

THE CELEBRATION OF THE DEDICATION

THE MINISTER OF THE RITE

It is the responsibility of the Bishop, who has been entrusted with the care of a particular Church, to dedicate to God new altars built in his diocese; if he cannot do this, he is to entrust the office to another Bishop, especially to one who is his associate and assistant in the pastoral care of the faithful for whom the new altar has been erected; or, in altogether special circumstances, to a Priest, to whom he is to give a special mandate.

THE CHOICE OF DAY

Since, in fact, an altar becomes sacred principally by the celebration of the Eucharist, in order to respect this truth, care should be taken that Mass is not celebrated on a new altar before it has been dedicated, so that the Mass of the Dedication may also be the first Eucharist celebrated on the altar itself.

A day should be chosen for the dedication of a new altar so that as many of the faithful as possible can gather, especially a Sunday, unless pastoral considerations suggest otherwise. However, the Rite of the Dedication of an Altar may not be celebrated during the Paschal Triduum, on Ash Wednesday, during the weekdays of Holy Week, and on the Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed.

THE MASS OF THE DEDICATION

The celebration of the Eucharist is inseparably linked to the Rite of the Dedication of an Altar. The Mass "For the Dedication of an Altar" is said. On the Nativity of the Lord, on the Epiphany, on the Ascension, on Pentecost Sunday and on the Sundays of Advent, Lent, and Easter, the Mass of the day is used, with the exception of the Prayer over the Offerings and the Preface, which are intimately interwoven with the rite itself.

It is fitting that the Bishop should concelebrate the Mass with Priests around him, especially those who have been given the office of directing the parish or the community for which the altar has been erected.

Source: Ceremonial of Bishops, The Liturgical Press: Collegeville, MN 1989

RELIC IN OUR ALTAR

The St. Francis Xavier Parish Altar has a **First Class Relic of St. Maria Goretti, The Martyr**. A record of the dedication signed by Bishop Ivan Camilleri and the pastor (Fr. James Cherickal) is kept with the relic and a second copy is kept in the church sacristy.