



Episode 26: The Altar

SUMMARY

The altar is the central feature of every Catholic church. It is the most significant element in the church building. (It is even more significant than the tabernacle, since without altar, there is no reserved Blessed Sacrament.)

The altar is the focal point of every liturgical celebration. The Church teaches us that Christ himself is the Victim; Christ is the Priest; Christ is the Altar of Sacrifice.

The Order of the Dedication of a Church can teach us much about the meaning of the altar. Until the altar is consecrated, it is treated as an inanimate object. At the beginning of the ceremony, the altar is ignored: there is no bow, no kiss, not even lighted candles. (“The Bishop, without kissing the altar, goes to the chair...” n°. 35) Before its consecration the altar is merely an object, a hunk of stone, a chunk of wood.

When it is put into service for the worship of God, the altar is first sprinkled with holy water. This constitutes a kind of washing or baptism; it is then anointed with Sacred Chrism. The altar is honored with incense, it is dressed with a white cloth, analogous to the garment of the

newly baptized. Candles are brought and, in the celebration of the Eucharist, the altar receives the Body of Christ. The altar, like the Christian at Baptism, is made another Christ. The altar is the permanent symbol of the presence of Christ for the Christian community.

The Roman Missal

The altar on which is effected the Sacrifice of the Cross made present under sacramental signs, is also the table of the Lord to which the People of God is convoked to participate in the Mass, and it is also the center of the thanksgiving that is accomplished through the Eucharist.

General Instruction, n°. 296

The altar should be built separate from the wall, in such a way that it is possible to walk around it easily and that Mass can be celebrated at it facing the people, which is desirable wherever possible. Moreover, the altar should occupy a place where it is truly the center toward which the attention of the whole congregation of the faithful naturally turns. The altar should usually be fixed and dedicated.

General Instruction, n°. 299

Romano Guardini

“The two altars, the one without and the one within, belong inseparably together. The visible altar at the heart of the church is but the external representation of the altar at the center of the human breast, which is God’s temple, of which the church with its walls and arches is but the expression and figure.”

IN THE TRADITION

“It was fitting that we should have such a high priest: holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners, higher than the heavens. He has no need, as did the high priests, to offer sacrifice day after day, first for his own sins and then for those of the people; he did that once for all when he offered himself.”

Hebrews 7:26-28

“The altar is an object of wonder: by nature it is stone, but it is made holy after it receives the Body of Christ.”

John Chrysostom
Homily 20 on II Corinthians, 3

THE TEACHING OF THE CHURCH

✠ “...On the night before he died, Jesus instituted the Eucharist and at the same time established the priesthood of the New Covenant. He is priest, victim and altar: the mediator between God the Father and his people (cf. Heb 5:5-10), the victim of atonement (cf. 1 Jn 2:2, 4:10) who offers himself on the altar of the Cross.

Sacramentum caritatis, n°. 23

✠ “...The altar of the New Covenant is the Lord’s Cross, from which the sacraments of the Paschal mystery flow. On the altar, which is the center of the church, the sacrifice of the Cross

is made present under sacramental signs. the altar is also the table of the Lord, to which the People of God are invited.⁶⁰ In certain Eastern liturgies, the altar is also the symbol of the tomb (Christ truly died and is truly risen).
Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), n°. 1182

IN THE PRAYER OF THE CHURCH

By the oblation of his Body,
he brought the sacrifices of old to fulfillment
in the reality of the Cross
and, by commending himself to you for our
salvation,
showed himself the Priest, the Altar, and the
Lamb of sacrifice.

Preface V of Easter

“May the light of Christ shine upon the table of
this altar, and may those who share the Lord’s
supper shine with his light.”

Order of the Dedication of a Church

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How does the altar in your church represent the various meanings ascribed to it by our tradition?
2. What can you do to deepen the reverence you have for the altar?
3. What connection do you make between the altar in church and the altar of your heart?

FOR FURTHER READING

Romano Guardini, *Sacred Signs* (St. Louis, MO: Pio Decimo Press, 1956).

Duncan Stroik, *The Church Building as a Sacred Place: Beauty, Transcendence and the Eternal* (Mundelein, IL: Hillenbrand Books, 2012).