

# The Altar

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“One of the bloodiest battles of World War One was fought at Verdun. The Germans were threatening to overrun France. A stand was made at Verdun, as the French shouted: “They shall not pass.” For several months Verdun took a shelling and battering that left practically every building in ruins. At last the Germans retreated. A war correspondent made his way into the shambles. Not one building was left untouched. A French guard took him to the cathedral on the hill. The roof was shot away. The windows were shattered. The walls were full of holes. A giant shell was imbedded in the floor. Practically everything was demolished in the great temple of God except—except the altar. On its four beautifully polished pillars, it stood unmarred in the midst of the rubble. The sight of that altar aroused in the newsmen the thought that religion and its altar will always remain.” This inspiring story was told by a Franciscan named Fr. Arthur Tonne. Fr. Tonne compiled many books of stories for priests to use in sermons and conferences. This little story is a beautiful introduction to our consideration of the Catholic altar.

In the Old Testament of the Bible we read how mankind offered sacrifices to God from the very beginning. From Adam and Eve all the way up to the beginning of the New Testament, sacrifices were offered to God. We read that Noe built an altar. After the Exodus, God gave very strict regulations for the building and use of an altar. The Catholic Church also has precise regulations for the construction of altars. All Catholics who love the Holy Sacrifice love the altar. The altar is the focal point of a Catholic Church. Let us have

a look at some of Holy Mother Church’s regulations concerning altars.

It must be a single stone, a figure of Christ, “the cornerstone,”. Now, not all altars are made of stone. Many altars are made from wood, or even plaster. In such cases, though, there is always an altar stone which fulfills all the requirements given here. If the altar is made of marble or stone, the entire table of the altar is the altar stone. In altars made from other materials, the altar stone is a smaller piece of marble that is set into the table of the altar. The altar, or altar stone, must be consecrated by a bishop in a solemn way. Carved into the stone are five crosses. These represent the five wounds of Christ from which flow all graces. In the stone must be enclosed the relics of two martyrs. This reminds us of the first Christians who erected altars on the tombs of the martyrs, as we still can see in the catacombs. In each altar-stone there is an opening called a sepulcher where these relics are placed. This is sealed. When the priest kisses the altar, which he does several times during Holy Mass, he is venerating these relics.

Those who look after the altar are very privileged people. There are many services one can provide in this regard. All over the world, wonderful and talented people spend hours preparing flowers to adorn the altar. There are those who look after the altar linens. The candlesticks as well as the candles themselves require constant attention. Those who keep the altar clean by dusting it and removing any wax that may have spilled are certainly not to be forgotten.

These wonderful people, and they are found in every church, provide edifying examples of dedication and love for the Holy Sacrifice. Often the work these people do is unseen. They come to the church at times when no one is present, to look after the altar. Most people do not see the work being done, they see only the results. It is good to remember these people in our prayers, for they are truly looking after elements that are essential to the liturgy. The regulations mentioned above concern the way the altar is constructed. Holy Mother Church also has regulations about how the altar is to be adorned.

It must be covered with three white linen cloths which are blessed. The practical reason for these cloths is to absorb the Precious Blood should any of It be spilled. The linen cloths also remind us of the burial shroud in which Our Lord's Body was wrapped when It was placed in the tomb. On every altar there must be two candles for a Low Mass, and six for a High Mass. The candle represents Christ. The wax, which must be at least 51% beeswax, represents the body of Christ, the wick represents His soul and the flame represents the divinity of Our Lord. The major requirement for every altar is the crucifix—not merely a cross, but a crucifix. This altar adornment reminds us that the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is the re-

presentation of Our Lord's sacrifice on Calvary. The crucifix is meant to be at a level that makes it easily accessible to the priest's view as he celebrates the Dread Mysteries.

The Missal on its stand or on a cushion is also an essential item for Holy Mass. Beautiful rugs and lace are often seen at the altar. Sometimes one hears people complaining about such expense. How different is the attitude of such people from the attitude of Faith that inspired those who built the great cathedrals! In the age of Faith no expense was too great for the altar. Although not strictly necessary, adorning the altar with flowers is a praiseworthy custom.

During Holy Mass let us look upon the altar and call to mind all the beautiful symbolism we find there. The altar represents Christ. This is another reason the priest reverences the altar so many times while celebrating the Holy Sacrifice. The altar is the place of

sacrifice, and that sacrifice is none other than the one offered by Our Divine Savior on Calvary, although in an unbloody manner. Every Mass requires an altar, and we absolutely require Holy Mass. It has been rightly said, "The world could sooner survive without the sun than without Holy Mass". Let every Catholic learn to love the altar, seeing in it an important means of sanctification.

