



The Altar I

The word "altar" derives from the Latin *altare* (from *adolere* – burn), and came to be used in the early Christian church to designate the table on which was placed the bread and wine for eucharist. The Greek language used the word *thysiasterion* (table of sacrifice) to designate an altar. Paul speaks of the "table of the Lord" (1 Corinthians 10:21), and it is at a table that Jesus foretells his death, giving us the sacrificial gift that we will celebrate in his memory until we assemble at the banquet in heaven.

The altar, then, is a symbol of Christ in the midst of the assembly of believers, a table dedicated for both the sacrifice and the paschal banquet.

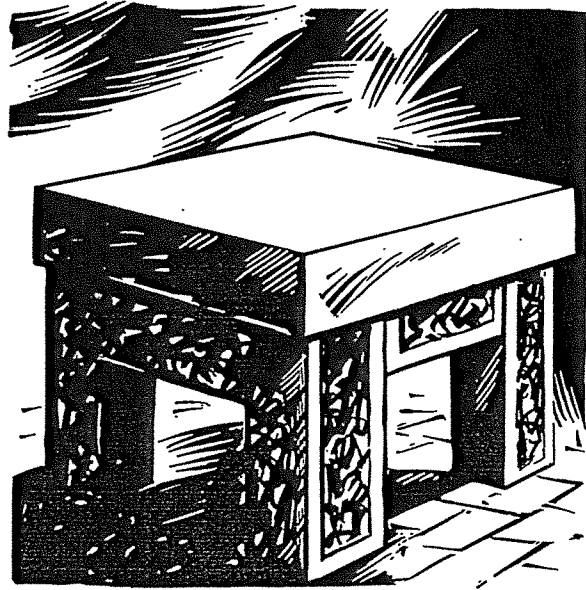
The altar was a simple free-standing table for the first few centuries of Christian worship, but it was soon affected by changing styles in church architecture and a changing theology of Christian worship. Ornate architectural detail, a more elaborate liturgy performed largely by the clergy and the placing of the altar on the rear wall of the apse meant that the altar was no longer the table of the assembly. It was primarily the resting place for the bread and wine for eucharist, the missal, candles, prayer cards, flowers and, later, the tabernacle.

The Second Vatican Council (1962 – 1965) revised the norms relating to the altar and used the earliest tradition of the church as its guide. Following this lead, the United States Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy wrote: "The altar, the holy table, should be the most noble, the most beautifully designed and constructed table the community can provide. It is the common table of the assembly, a symbol of the Lord. . . .

standing free, approachable from every side." (*Environment and Art in Catholic Worship*, #71)

The altar must be a piece of furniture of such beauty that it honors the holy action that occurs there, of such stature that it is worthy of the mystery celebrated there, of such eloquent simplicity that it invites the people of God to participate in a most extraordinary gift of sacrificial love. The altar stands as a worthy symbol of Christ and a holy table where God's people are nourished for their pilgrimage.

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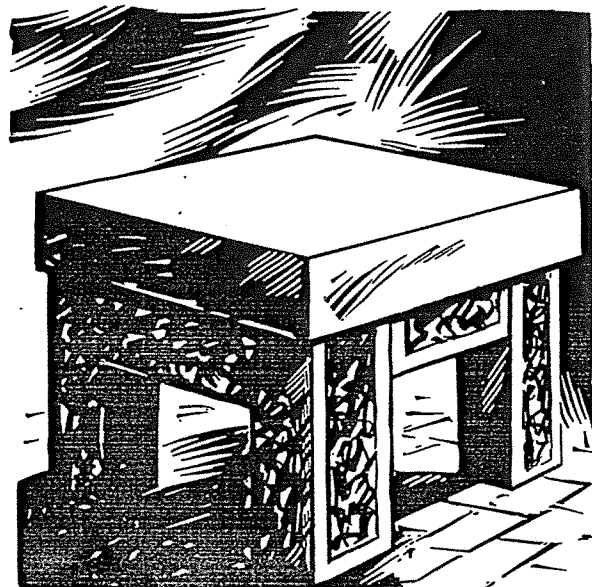
The Altar II

Have you ever noticed the priest kiss the altar at the beginning and end of Mass? This graceful act highlights the significance of the altar as a central symbol of our worship life.

Apart from the introduction of the use of the vernacular at Mass, the change in the location of the altar — away from the back wall of the church and into the midst of the assembly — is probably the most obvious effect of the Second Vatican Council. This change allowed people to gather more easily around the altar. Two related changes were also mandated by the Council. In the pre-Vatican II liturgy, because the priest alone performed most of the liturgical functions, a long altar was needed so that the two readings could be proclaimed from opposite ends of the altar while remaining separate from the eucharistic action, which took place in the center of the altar. Such an elongated table is no longer necessary. Secondly, because communion should be given from the sacrifice just enacted on the

altar, the tabernacle was removed from the main altar. This maintains the integrity of both altar and tabernacle as sites of Christ's presence in the church. We have grown in our awareness of Christ's presence in the gathered assembly, in the proclamation of the word, in the person of the priest and in the eucharistic elements. We have been less attentive to the symbolic significance of the altar itself.

The Rite of Dedication of an Altar (which most often takes place during the dedication of the church in which the altar is located) gives us a glimpse of the significance of this symbol. In that rite, the altar is sprinkled with water, anointed with chrism and incensed by the bishop in a pattern much like our initiation rituals. It is then clothed with an altar cloth and adorned with lighted candles. These rituals leave no doubt that the altar is "the midpoint between heaven and earth." With the ancient images of Abraham's altar of sacrifice and the table of the Last Supper firmly rooted in our tradition, we encircle our parish altar, confident that God is present in our midst.



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