



Dedicating a Church

The Dedication of a Church Series, 1 of 10

The liturgies of the Roman Catholic Church are rich in signs, symbols, rites and sacraments. The faithful are largely familiar with the celebrations of Sunday Mass, baptisms, weddings and funerals. The Order of the Dedication of a Church, however, contains rites associated with the creation and opening of a new church building and are less frequently experienced by members of the faithful. This series will explore the significant rites of The Order of the Dedication of a Church, particularly for a faith community which is preparing to celebrate this liturgy. It should be remembered that a good liturgy is one in which all present actively participate and are able to encounter the presence of the living Lord. The purpose of this series is not to turn the liturgy into a pedantic experience, but rather to help those participating to enter more fully into the spirit of the liturgical celebration. Most importantly, while the dedication of a church for worship is no small achievement, it must always be remembered that the church is not a building. It is the baptized People of God, called to serve as disciples of Christ. The building, while dedicated for a holy purpose, is the house in which the church, God's people, assembles in faith. Nevertheless, "from ancient times the name 'church' has also been given to the building in which the Christian community is gathered to hear the Word of God, to pray together, to take part in the Sacraments, and to celebrate the Eucharist." (The Order of the Dedication of a Church, 1) The church is, as the prayer of dedication states, a place where God's faithful, "gathered around the table of the altar, celebrate the memorial of the Paschal Mystery and (are) refreshed by the banquet of Christ's Word and his Body." (62)

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The Church Dedicates the Church

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“Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly...he read out of the book from daybreak till midday in the presence of the men, the women and children old enough to understand.” (Nehemiah 8:2-3) This passage from the Old Testament is the required first reading at the dedication of a church. It is very appropriate because it distinguishes the kind of gathering that takes place in a church, that is, the assembly of God’s people for a sacred purpose. The people are not coming together because it is dinner time – they are coming together to hear God’s word and worship the Lord. The word “assembly” in Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament, is “qahal.” In the language of the New Testament, Greek, it is translated “ekklesia” which is the root word in English for terms like “ecclesiastic,” meaning of or pertaining to the church. Although we often think of the word “church” as being associated with a building, its true meaning is the People of God assembled for a sacred purpose. In this second part of this series on the Order of the Dedication of a Church, it would be tempting to jump right into the rites and symbols of the celebration. However, it is even more important to start by remembering what the dedicated space is for: it is for the church to assemble in prayer. In fact it would be fair to say that the actual dedication of a church building occurs when it is first used by the church, God’s people, who come to pray within its walls and celebrate the Eucharist. Keep in mind as this series unfolds that the very act of assembling and prayerfully participating in a church’s dedication is in fact the dedication of that holy place. It is dedicated by its use for the sacred liturgy. The proclamation of God’s word, the breaking of the bread and sharing of the cup, and the praise and worship of the assembly all make the place holy. Therefore, a celebration in which all can fully participate internally and externally is crucial. That is why the rite itself states that, “A day should be chosen for the dedication of the new church so that as many of the faithful as possible can gather, especially a Sunday.” (The Order of the Dedication of a Church, 7) The church, the body of Christ, dedicates the church, the building for God’s assembly.

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Let Us Go Rejoicing to the House of the Lord

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There are three options for the opening rites of the dedication of a church. Preferred when possible is for those present to gather where they have been celebrating Mass and then process to the doors of the new church. Leading the way is the bishop who presides over the dedication and himself serves as a reminder of the connection of the parish to the wider church. At the doors of the church, a brief ritual takes place where those involved with construction and design hand over plans and a key to the bishop. It is not only a nice way to enter the building as church for the first time, but it also recognizes the work of human hands (and minds) which went into the creation of the building. Human ingenuity; artistic creativity; financial contributions; meetings and decisions, not to mention “sweat equity,” have gone into the creation of this space. This simple moment at the door recognizes the human dimensions of what has been built. The door is opened by the pastor, and all enter for the first time, not as individuals, but as the body of Christ, to make it holy. As people enter the church behind him, the bishop moves to the chair where he will bless holy water: “the bishop blesses the water for sprinkling the people as a sign of repentance and as a remembrance of baptism and for purifying the walls and the altar of the new church.” (The Order of the Dedication of a Church, 48) Given that more and more churches are creating larger fonts to comply with the needs of baptism, he may rightly stop at the font first and bless all of the water therein. The blessing powerfully reminds all present of God’s use of water to intervene and save his people throughout history. Once the water is blessed, the bishop moves throughout the space sprinkling the walls and the people. It is customary when people are sprinkled with holy water to make the sign of the cross. When he reaches the altar, it is thoroughly sprinkled with holy water. During the sprinkling, all should join in singing “I saw water flowing from the temple” (49) or another acclamation. Once at the chair, the bishop gives the absolution and a robust “Gloria” is sung for the first time in the church. Then follows the Collect or Opening Prayer which beautifully sums up the purpose of this celebration: Almighty ever living God, pour out your grace upon this place and extend the gift of your help to all who call upon you, that the power of your word and of the Sacraments may strengthen here the hearts of your faithful. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son... Amen. (52)

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The Liturgy of the Word

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After the bishop prays the Collect or Opening Prayer of the Mass of Dedication, all are seated and turn their attention to the word of God. On this one occasion, the Lectionary for Mass is carried by the first reader who, accompanied by the psalmist and the second reader, approaches the bishop and hands him the Lectionary. The bishop takes it and says: "May the word of God resound always in this building, to open for you the mystery of Christ and to bring about your salvation in the church." (The Order of the Dedication of a Church, 53) The first reader takes the Lectionary and leads the others to the ambo and proclaims the first reading from the Book of Nehemiah. In the reading, the Israelites are summoned to listen to the word of God just as the church is being dedicated as a place for the word to be proclaimed. All respond to the first reading with Psalm 19, "Your words, Lord, are spirit and life." The second reading follows. During the Gospel acclamation, The Book of the Gospels is processed to the ambo for the first time and the deacon or a priest proclaims the Gospel. The church teaches that when a person reads the scripture at liturgy, "it is Jesus Christ himself who proclaims the word." (Sacrosanctum Concilium, 7) The presence of Christ in the Liturgy of the Word is not in the ink on the printed page, but in the proclaiming of the word in the voice of the reader and in the hearing of the word by the assembly. Not unlike the Eucharist, the word of God is meant to be given and received. The sacred sound of God's word reverberates in the space of the church, and those who hear it are to be doers of the word, not hearers only. (See James 1:22) The assembly is transformed by God's word made flesh and made bearers of the good news. The scriptures are then broken open for the assembly by the bishop who preaches a homily on the passages and the occasion of the dedication. All then respond to God's word with the Profession of Faith. Next, all are invited to join in the Litany of the Saints who are called upon for prayers during the dedication. The litany concludes with the prayer of the bishop: Mercifully accept our petitions, we pray, O Lord, through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary and all the Saints, so that this building to be dedicated to your name may be a house of salvation and grace where the Christian people, gathering as one, will worship you in spirit and in truth and be built up in charity. Through Christ our Lord. Amen. (60)

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The Altar Table

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Before examining the particular rites of The Order of the Dedication of a Church, which have as their primary focus the altar table itself, one must consider, what exactly is the altar? It is revelatory that the church uses not only the term “altar” but “table” as well to describe this central furnishing of the church. Altar and table. An altar is a place of sacrifice. On the altar, the sacrifice of Christ is commemorated (re-presented) in the Eucharist. It is a table, too, because this is the place where the church celebrates the meal of the Eucharist left by Christ at the Last Supper with the command to “Do this in memory of me.” (See Luke 22:19) The introduction to The Order of a Dedication of a Church, 16, explains the symbolic meaning of the altar: “By the anointing with Chrism the altar is made a symbol of Christ.” In “Preface V of Easter,” it further states that, “by commending himself to you for our salvation, (Christ) showed himself the priest, the altar, and the lamb of sacrifice.” (Roman Missal, The Order of Mass, 49) In the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (298), it states, “It is desirable that in every church there be a fixed altar, since this more clearly and permanently signifies Christ Jesus, the Living Stone” (see 1 Peter 2:4; cf. Ephesians 2:20). Of all of the furnishings and sacred objects in a church building, the altar table carries the most weight as a symbol of Christ. It should therefore be treated with the utmost of respect. Only sacred things for liturgical purposes should be placed on it, not pens and papers; phones or jackets. The altar table, even outside of liturgy, should not be used for any other purpose, no matter how enticing it may be. Once dedicated, this symbol of Christ should not be misused as a prop for other things like the Christmas manger. It should never be obscured by Christmas, Easter or funeral flowers or any other objects no matter how sacred they may seem. “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.” (GIRM, 299) An altar cloth covers the altar; the proper sign of reverence when approaching or passing the altar is a profound bow. This sacred furnishing, symbol of Christ himself, location of the Holy Spirit’s work, and place of divine encounter should always be kept clear and visible. It is a table for God’s people from which all are fed the body and blood of Christ. Now that the meaning and importance of this most sacred of furnishings has been examined, the next segment of this series will consider the specific rites of The Order of the Dedication of a Church.

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Prayer and Anointing

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Once the Litany of the Saints has been sung and the Liturgy of the Word completed, the rites proper to the dedication begin. There is a lengthy prayer of dedication said by the bishop near the altar. The rite notes, however, that “The celebration of the Eucharist is the most important rite and the only necessary one, for the dedication of a church.” (The Order of the Dedication of a Church, 15) Therefore, the Eucharist may not be celebrated on the new altar before the dedication, and if in fact Mass is celebrated on the new altar, the following rites are omitted because the celebration of the Eucharist would have already dedicated the altar and church. The lengthy prayer of dedication by the bishop asks God to “graciously pour forth from heaven your sanctifying power upon this church and upon this altar.” The prayer asks that the faithful may gather “around the table of the altar, celebrate the memorial of the Paschal Mystery and be refreshed by the banquet of Christ’s word and of his body.” It also asks that “Here may the poor find mercy, the oppressed attain true freedom, and all people be clothed with the dignity of your children...” (62) All sing or say “Amen” at the end of the prayer and then the anointing of the altar takes place. “Then he (the bishop) pours the sacred Chrism on the middle of the altar and on each of its four corners, and it is praiseworthy for him to anoint the entire table with it. After this the bishop anoints the walls of the church...” (64) priests may assist with the anointing of the walls, “making signs of the Cross with sacred Chrism.” (64) “By anointing with Chrism the altar is made a symbol of Christ who, before all others, is and is called, ‘The Anointed One’; for the Father anointed him with the Holy Spirit and constituted him High Priest, who on the altar of his body would offer the sacrifice of his life for the salvation of all; moreover, the anointing of the church signifies that it is given over entirely and perpetually to Christian worship.” (16) Once the altar is anointed, it may only be used for sacred purposes and should be accorded respect as a symbol of Christ in the church.

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