



## **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)

REV. THOMAS DENTE – WORSHIP OFFICE – ARCHDIOCESE OF NEWARK



### **The Church Dedicates the Church**

The Dedication of a Church Series, 2 of 10

“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.

REV. THOMAS DENTE – WORSHIP OFFICE – ARCHDIOCESE OF NEWARK



### **Let Us Go Rejoicing to the House of the Lord**

The Dedication of a Church Series, 3 of 10

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**

Dedication of a Church Series, 4 of 10

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)

REV. THOMAS DENTE – WORSHIP OFFICE – ARCHDIOCESE OF NEWARK