

Lesson 3

Veneration of the Altar

Last week we talked about the entrance procession and how it begins to bring us together as a praying community and is symbolic of all of us being led by Christ into the heaven.

Action

As everyone in the procession enters the sanctuary the Deacon places the Book of the Gospels on the altar and the priest walks around the altar and kisses it at the center, placing both of his hands on its surface and joining them when he stands. The deacon also kisses the altar simultaneously with the priest.

History

The Mass is a memorial in which the sacrifice of the cross is perpetuated and the banquet of communion with the Lord's Body and Blood is eaten. St. Ambrose, one of the great doctors of the Church wrote that, "The altar represents the Body of Christ and the Body of Christ is on the altar."

Catholic altars may also contain relics of one or more saints. Relics are pieces of clothing or bone, hair or some other tangible material that are closely connected with a saint. Placing relics in an altar is a tradition that began when Mass was offered over the tombs of the martyrs. It became required to have a relic in every altar in 787 AD when the second council of Nicaea made it a church law.

The altar in a Catholic church is the place where the priest, acting in the person of Jesus Christ, re-presents the two aspects of the same mystery: the altar of sacrifice and the table of the Lord. The altar is symbolic of Christ, who is present on the altar and in the midst of those who are participating in the Mass. Christ is both the victim who is offered for our redemption and the food from heaven who is giving himself to us. The priest and deacon kiss the altar, upon entering the sanctuary and upon leaving it.

What We Can Do To More Fully Participate

When we approach the altar, we bow toward it to show it the honor due it as the altar of sacrifice and table of the Lord. When the priest and deacon kiss the altar, we call to mind why they are reverencing it. At this moment, we place ourselves in God's presence and thank Him for the gift of his Son who sacrificed himself so that we might again become friends of God by striving to become more like Jesus.