

Understanding the Mass: Veneration of the Altar

Why do the priest and deacon kiss the altar at the beginning and at the end of Mass? In his book, “The Mystery of Faith: A Study of the Structural Elements of the Mass,” Lawrence Johnson writes, “*In ancient times the kiss as a sign of greeting was used to show reverence for temples and images of gods. It seems that the table was likewise honored before the family meal in places where every meal was considered sacred.*”¹ For centuries the Mass was celebrated in house churches and most likely the families’ tables were used for the celebration on the Lord’s day. Johnson explains the development. He writes,

By the fourth century Christian worship appropriated this sign of honor since the altar was the ‘table of the Lord.’ As the altar came to be constructed of stone, it was looked upon as the symbol of Christ, the cornerstone and the spiritual rock of the Church. With the growth of the cult of the martyrs, relics were placed beneath the altar, and the kiss was seen as greeting them the whole Church the thirteenth century the altar was kissed only three times during Mass: at the beginning, during the Eucharistic Prayer, and before the dismissal. A century later this sign so multiplied that the importance of the original kiss at the beginning and end of the celebration was perhaps obscured. Today the altar is venerated with a kiss only at the beginning and end of Mass.²



As part of the procession incense may be used to venerate the altar as we will see in future liturgies. Incense has significant meaning for worship. Johnson writes,

The use of incense at worship is of great antiquity. In pre-Christian times it had numerous meanings: a symbol of sacrifice, a festive accompaniment for processions, a sign of honor, a means of purification and of expelling evil spirits. Christians first rejected the use of incense since it was closely associated with pagan cult. But after the time of Constantine (280–337) various dignities accorded to major Roman officials were transferred to the Bishop of Rome

¹ The Mystery of Faith: A Study of the Structural Elements of the Order of the Mass Pg. 13

² Ibid Pg. 13

and the other Bishops. Thus it became customary to bear incense before them as they entered the church in procession—a vestige of the Roman-Byzantine ceremonial of carrying incense before the Emperor. A formal incensation of the altar in the Roman Mass, however, is only attested in the eleventh century. Scholars suggest that the original meaning of the practice was purification and protection. Furthermore, there was also the Old Testament injunction that the service of the High Priest was to begin with incense (see Leviticus 16:12). At any rate, this incensation was generally interpreted as a sign of the altar’s being encircled by an atmosphere of prayer and sacrifice ascending to God. ³

A step by step explanation of the veneration process explains much of the theology of the altar and the surrounding sacramentals. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal reads; “*When they have arrived at the sanctuary, the Priest, the Deacon, and the ministers reverence the altar with a profound bow. Moreover, as an expression of veneration, the Priest and Deacon then kiss the altar itself; the Priest, if appropriate, also incenses the cross and the altar.*” ⁴

Furthermore, the GIRM adds,

When they reach the altar, the Priest and ministers make a profound bow. The cross adorned with a figure of Christ crucified, and carried in procession, may be placed next to the altar to serve as the altar cross, in which case it must be the only cross used; otherwise it is put away in a dignified place. As for the candlesticks, these are placed on the altar or near it. It is a praiseworthy practice for the Book of the Gospels to be placed on the altar. The Priest goes up to the altar and venerates it with a kiss. Then, if appropriate, he incenses the cross and the altar, walking around the latter. ⁵

Incense itself has a profound theological meaning. The writer of the Book of Revelation writes, “*Another angel came and stood at the altar, holding a gold censer. He was given a great quantity of incense to offer, along with the prayers of all the holy ones, on the gold altar that was before the throne. The smoke of the incense along with the prayers of the holy ones went up before God from the hand of the angel*” (Revelation 8:3-4). The Psalmist also expresses the meaning of thurification or incensation. He writes, “*Lord, I call to you; hasten to me; listen*

³ Ibid Pg. 13

⁴ GIRM Par. 49

⁵ Girm Par. 122-123

to my plea when I call. Let my prayer be incense before you; my uplifted hands an evening offering” (Psalm 141).

The GIRM explains the incensation of the altar and the surrounding sacramental. It reads,

Incense may be used optionally in any form of Mass:

- a) during the Entrance Procession;*
- b) at the beginning of Mass, to incense the cross and the altar;*
- c) at the procession before the Gospel and the proclamation of the Gospel itself;*
- d) after the bread and the chalice have been placed on the altar, to incense the offerings, the cross, and the altar, as well as the Priest and the people;*
- e) at the elevation of the host and the chalice after the Consecration.*

*The Priest, having put incense into the thurible, blesses it with the Sign of the Cross, without saying anything. Before and after an incensation, a profound bow is made to the person or object that is incensed, **except for the altar and the offerings for the Sacrifice of the Mass.** Three*

swings of the thurible are used to incense: the Most Blessed Sacrament, a relic of the Holy Cross and

*images of the Lord
veneration, the
Sacrifice of the
the Book of the
candle, the Priest,
swings of the
incense relics and
exposed for public*



*exposed for public
offerings for the
Mass, the altar cross,
Gospels, the paschal
and the people. Two
thurible are used to
images of the Saints
veneration; this should*

be done, however, only at the beginning of the celebration, following the incensation of the altar. The altar is incensed with single swings of the thurible in this way:

- a) if the altar is freestanding with respect to the wall, the Priest incenses walking around it;*
- b) if the altar is not freestanding, the Priest incenses it while walking first to the right hand side, then to the left.*

The cross, if situated on the altar or near it, is incensed by the Priest before he incenses the altar; otherwise, he incenses it when he passes in front of it. ⁶

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal defines the altar as “the altar or Lord’s table, . . . is the center of the whole Liturgy of the Eucharist.” ⁷ Moreover, in his book “Theology of the Eucharistic Table,” Fr. Jeremy Driscoll concludes that the altar is where the center of theology takes place. In short, it is where all theological specialties listen “deeply to each other” and it is there when we do Eucharist that all

theological
Driscoll
precisely at
master themes
theological
through two
origin. ⁹ Fr.



reflection is based. ⁸ Fr.
explains that it is
the altar where “ the
that the Catholic
tradition has developed
millennium” find their
Driscoll goes on to list

the eight master themes, which we will address as we continue the “Understanding the Mass” series. In short the eight master themes are: Ecclesiology, the Word of God, the Paschal Mystery, Anamnesis, Epiclesis, and Eschatology, Pneumatology, Moral Theology, Spirituality, and finally Missiology. ¹⁰ Ultimately, “*the altar, on which is effected the Sacrifice of the Cross made present under sacramental signs, is also the table of the Lord to which the People of God is convoked to participate in the Mass, and it is also the center of the thanksgiving that is accomplished through the Eucharist.*” ¹¹ Hence, the altar or the symbol of Christ is venerated both with incense, a profound bow, and a kiss by the priest and deacon.

⁶ GIRM Par 276-277

⁷ GIRM Par. 73

⁸ Theology at the Eucharistic Table Pg. 15

⁹ Ibid Pg. 13

¹⁰ Ibid Pages 1-28

¹¹ GIRM Par 296

Images Cited

Pope Francis and Deacons Venerating Altar:

http://www.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://i.dailymail.co.uk/i/pix/2014/04/27/article-2614241-1D64D4E600000578-390_964x641.jpg&imgrefurl=http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2614241/One-million-people-Vatican-Francis-Benedict-XVI-canonise-John-XXIII-John-Paul-II.html&h=641&w=964&tbnid=Nlrf0UWXgyUuOM:&docid=vyivTNmWZOusGM&ei=ZtwvVoOsAcPOjwPzyqDICg&tbnm=isch&client=safari&ved=0CCIQMygGMAZqFQoTCIP3jua848gCFUPnYwodcyUIqQ

Pope Francis Incensing:

https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=images&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CAcQjRxqFQoTCMGC1_m748gCFRcqiAodT28ESw&url=http%3A%2F%2Fpopeindc.cua.edu%2Fnews-social%2Fnews-blog%2Fportfolio_category%2Fthemass%2Fpage%2F2%2F&bvm=bv.106130839,d.cGU&psig=AFQjCNFQl3Wuj2vUUbXO8gKmsUToy7g3kQ&ust=1446063123764791

St Patrick's Cathedral Altar New York:

http://www.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://sharpshootersinternational.files.wordpress.com/2011/06/jml9778-nx.jpg&imgrefurl=https://sharpshootersinternational.wordpress.com/2011/06/01/week-70-june-1-2011/&h=531&w=800&tbnid=mr904vnY6eX_YM:&docid=KLExnPRf4n7-M&ei=cekvVrHRK9jSjwPOvq4g&tbnm=isch&client=safari&ved=0CCIQMygFMAVqFQoTCPHNzZ7J48gCFVjpYwodTp8LBA

