



December 23, 2018

Dear Parishioners,

Throughout Advent, I have been preaching on the importance of the altar that is being dedicated this weekend by Bishop Stika. In the introduction for *The Order of the Dedication of an Altar*, USCCB (2018), §26, it directs:

“The faithful are not only to be informed in good time about the dedication of a new altar but they are also to be suitably prepared to take an active part in the rite. Accordingly they should be taught what each rite signifies and how it carried out. For the purpose of giving this instruction, what is said above about the nature and dignity of an altar and the meaning and import of the rites may be used. In this way the faithful will be imbued with a due and proper love for the altar.”

Needless to say, the blessing of an altar is a big deal. Over the course of the Sundays of Advent, I have attempted to be faithful to this directive, and as a reinforcement and reiteration of my preaching, I would like to set this down in writing. The first thing that we note is found in §1:

“The early Fathers of the Church, meditating on the Word of God, did not hesitate to assert that Christ was the Victim, the Priest, and the Altar of his own Sacrifice.

For in the Letter to the Hebrews, Christ is presented as the great High Priest who is also the living Altar of the heavenly Temple; furthermore, in the Book of Revelation our Redeemer appears as the Lamb that has been slain, whose offering is borne by the hands of the holy Angel to the altar on high.”

Here we see the unicity of Christ’s mission as Victim, Priest and Altar of His own sacrifice, and how this mystery was presented to us in the Scriptures. We are familiar with the concept that Jesus is the victim of the Sacrifice, that is, the Lamb of God, the acceptable Sacrifice, by whose blood the human race was redeemed. We are probably also familiar with the concept that Jesus is the High Priest who offers this Sacrifice:

“This is why the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own. I have power to lay it down, and power to take it up again. This command I have received from my Father.” (John 10:17-18)

However, perhaps more unfamiliar to most is the concept that Jesus is the very altar of His own Sacrifice. Quoting from the *Dedication*, §4:

“Because it is at the altar that the memorial of the Lord is celebrated and his Body and Blood given to the faithful, it came to pass that the Church’s writers see in the altar a sign of Christ himself—hence the saying arose: ‘The altar is Christ.’ ”

In the Prayer of Dedication, we see three types from the Old Testament: Noah, Abraham, and Moses, who all built altars to offer a sacrifice. “All this,” says the prayer, “Christ has fulfilled in the Paschal Mystery.” It goes on to say, “Let this stone, cut and shaped, be for us a sign of Christ, from whose pierced side flowed blood and water, by which were established the Sacraments of the Church.”

The second topic for catechesis is that the Christian is also a spiritual altar. From the *Dedication*, §2:

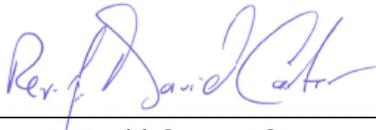
“Since Christ, Head and Teacher, is the true Altar, his members and disciples are also spiritual altars on which the sacrifice of a life lived in holiness is offered to God. This is what the Fathers themselves seem to indicate: Saint Ignatius of Antioch asks the Romans quite plainly: ‘Grant me nothing more than to be offered as a sacrifice to God, while there is still an altar ready’; Saint Polycarp exhorts widows to live in holiness, for ‘they are God’s altar,’ To these voices the voice of still others, including that of Saint Gregory the Great, reply. He

teaches: 'What is God's altar if not the soul of those who lead good lives?...Rightly then, the heart [of the just] is said to be the altar of God.' "

In meditating upon this section, in conjunction with our new altar, I made a connection with its flaws. The new altar has a chip in it that had to be repaired. It was done so with great care and restored the altar in a way that you would not have noticed, had I not told you. But the altar is Christ, and the altar is us, in Christ. The question that arises: Do we think the altar to be unworthy because of its flaws? Do we think ourselves useless because of our imperfections? See what marvelous work God does! He makes whole what is shattered. He makes holy what was chipped. In fact, in His own death in the flesh, He consecrates the greatest human weakness, death, and makes it into life eternal. He wants to do the same with us. Offer yourself to Him, though chipped and imperfect, that He may make you a worthy offer of His sacrifice.

As Bishop Stika consecrates our altar this Sunday, I pray that you might participate actively, as a result of this catechesis, and know the great dignity of being in the presence of Christ and the great responsibility of being made a member of His Body.

Sincerely in Christ Jesus,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Rev. J. David Carter". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath it.

Rev. J. David Carter, JCL
Pastor and Rector