

## The Mystical Meaning of the Altar

### *Summary of the April 18, 2001 Una Voce meeting*

“We most humbly beseech Thee, almighty God, command these things to be carried up by the hands of Thy holy angel to Thine altar on high, in the sight of Thy divine majesty, that as many of us who, by participation at this altar, shall receive the most sacred Body + and Blood + of Thy Son may be filled with every heavenly blessing and grace. Through the same Christ our Lord...” – *Roman Canon of Traditional Mass and Eucharistic Prayer I, Novus Ordo.*

Many, if not most of today’s contemporary songs (not hymns) used for Mass emphasize only one aspect of the altar – that of the “Table of Plenty” or “Table of the Lord”, ignoring both the Sacrifice and the transcendental aspect of this holy symbol. (We will return to St. Paul’s use of the phrase “Table of the Lord” later.) The lopsided, totally horizontal emphasis in the verses typical of this kind of music plays no little part in the Protestantizing of Catholics in the pews every Sunday. Polls repeatedly show that only about 33% of Catholics believe in the Real Presence anymore, and small wonder! When the notion of sacrifice is divorced from the liturgy in the translations of prayers, in gestures, in sanctuary furnishings, and in songs sung, the Protestant belief that the “Communion service” is the re-enactment of the Last Supper replaces Catholic truth: that the Eucharistic celebration is the re-presentation of the supreme Sacrifice of Calvary which took place on the altar of the cross. In the Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1383 we are told:

“The altar, around which the Church is gathered in the celebration of the Eucharist, represents the two aspects of the same mystery: the altar of the sacrifice and the table of the Lord. This is all the more so since the Christian altar is the symbol of Christ himself, present in the midst of the assembly of his faithful, both as the victim offered for our reconciliation and as food from heaven who is giving himself to us. ‘For what is the altar of Christ if not the image of the Body of Christ?’ asks St. Ambrose. He says elsewhere, ‘The altar represents the body [of Christ] and the Body of Christ is on the altar.’”

As in all of our heritage, unlocking the deep symbolism of the altar must be done within the context of the living tradition of the Church. And as in the senses of Scripture, our sacred objects have both literal and spiritual meanings, the spiritual being subdivided into

- **allegorical** – referring to something in the life of Christ
- **moral** – a call to conversion
- **anagogical** – leading up to God, eternal glory.

### **Etymology**

The word “altar” in the singular didn’t exist in Latin. At the time of Christ, the pagan world had *aras* (altars) everywhere, including their homes. These were altars to their pagan gods. The Jews used a special word for “altar” because the Greek and Latin words connoted pagan rites. The Jewish word was translated into Latin as “altare”, which derived from the Latin *altus* (high), which derived from *alo, alere, alui, altus* which means “having grown big; having been nourished”. The altar therefore signifies a high place, close to God, where a sacrifice is to

be made and at which one is nourished to grow “big” in grace. The three steps the priest ascends to the altar in the Traditional Mass demonstrate this concept of going up to the high places.

## Fear and Dread

From the concept of height we also acquire the idea of exalted holiness, because the high places were places of sacrifices and worship of God (or gods) in all peoples. *Introibo ad altare Dei...* When the priest says these words at the beginning of the Traditional Mass, he evokes the idea of exalted holiness, and along with it, the accompanying idea of the separation between us and God. This separation contains the idea that we are going toward God with both fascination and dread, as Jacob experienced after his vision. The seventh gift of the Holy Spirit, fear of the Lord, is exactly the combination of fascination and dread in His awesome presence.

In pondering this separateness at the foot of the altar, we ask ourselves, “Who are we? Who is He?” The altar reminds us we are in the presence of God, the Wholly Other and we are his creatures. From this, then, we realize the need for sorrow for our offenses and the need for the Sacrifice, Jesus. In the Traditional Mass, the priest and acolytes in turn recite the *Confiteor* before the priest ascends the altar to kiss it. Pope John Paul II in *Dominicae Cena* #7 writes: “For when we realize Who it is that we receive in Eucharistic communion, there springs up in us almost spontaneously a sense of unworthiness, together with sorrow for our sins and an interior need for purification.”

Jacob experienced the combination of fear and dread after his vision of the angels going up and down the ladder and hearing the voice of God (Gen: 28: 10-18). . When Jacob awoke from his vision with his hair standing on end he said, “Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it.” “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.” Then he took the stone he had slept on and made it into an altar which he anointed with oil. Today, in the dedication of a church and an altar, the liturgy repeats the words of Jacob and during the ceremony, anoints the altar with oil. Christ is the Anointed One. Here we have another tie in the allegorical interpretation of the altar. We followers of Christ, in Baptism, Confirmation, and in the Sacrament of the Sick, are also anointed with oil. The altar therefore symbolizes the Christian soul as well, which must suffer and die to self in imitation of Christ, offering itself along with Christ at the Mass to the heavenly Father, and becoming one with Christ in Holy Communion.

## Additional Symbolism

The altar also connotes Christ as the Rock of Salvation, deriving from Exodus when the rock followed the Jews in the desert and from which water sprang to keep them from dying of thirst. Christ, the Rock of our Salvation, is the spring, the fountain of grace, the living water of Baptism, and so Baptism is connected to the altar. Because we have been baptized, and when we are in sanctifying grace, we are invited to partake of Christ’s Body and Blood at the altar. Likewise, the altar connotes Christ as the cornerstone, and we are the living stones connected to the cornerstone, without which we cannot stand.

We refer to the altar as an icon of the sepulchre of Christ as well, containing an affinity with the tombs of the martyrs. Our custom of placing relics in altars derives from the offering of the Sacrifice of the Mass on the tombs of martyrs who, in death, were united with Christ for all eternity. **At the altar, we are at Calvary, not re-enacting the Last Supper.**

Finally, one of the more obscure but interesting symbols derived from the altar is the marriage bed where Christ meets His spouse, the Church. As in marriage, the two shall become one, so in receiving the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Christ, we become one with Him. Christ embraces each and every one of us individually and personally. The embrace is an invitation to enter into the ultimate act of love: to die for the salvation of others as he died for us. St. Paul tells us we are to put on the mind of Christ (Phil.2:5-8), that we are to glorify God and bear Him in our bodies (1 Cor. 6:19).

St. Paul (1 Cor. 10) also refers to the “Table of the Lord”. This is within the context of the altar of sacrifice and the pagan worship of demons. The Greek word “table” had an acquired meaning: “bank”. When we put together the concept of being nourished and the concept of bank, we are being fed from the riches of the Lord which is Christ Himself *at the altar of Sacrifice*.



In celebrating both the Traditional Mass and the *Novus Ordo*, the celebrant kisses the altar symbolizing both Christ and the Church. This action happens more often in the Traditional Mass. Christ and His Church – the people, the Church Militant, the Church Suffering, the Church Triumphant, are one on earth and in heaven.

St. Jerome tells us that **“Every altar is mystically one and the same, as one faith, one baptism, one church.”** And Father Jerome Bertram in presenting a paper on the subject of the altar at a CIEL conference said: **“It is the altar which makes the Church, the sacrifice which makes the altar.”** Without the sacrifice then, there is no Communion.

To emphasize the sacredness of the altar as well as the role of *alter Christus*, in the Traditional Mass only the priest (bishop) may touch the altar, not the deacons or subdeacons, or laity.

### A short history of the Christian altar

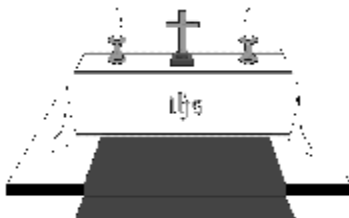
In the early days of the Church, Christians gathered in private homes to celebrate the Eucharist because of the persecutions. The tables used were most likely wood and U-shaped as they were the ordinary tables of the household. As the situation stabilized for Christians, the Catholic Church took over many Roman basilicas and turned them into churches. These basilicas were courts of law where cases were tried. The architecture of the courts contained a curved apse, in front of which was an altar upon which sacrifices were offered to the gods before cases were heard. The people were in the main body of the basilica while the pagan priests were in the apse area. Most of the basic designs of churches in Europe and the Americas carried this concept because for centuries, the churches outside of Rome wanted to be as close to Rome in practice as possible.

When we enter the church and approach the altar, we are approaching the seat of justice and mercy. Christ, Who will come to judge the living and the dead, and Christ, the merciful Forgiver of sins in this life is represented by the altar.

In the early centuries of the Church, only bishops were allowed to celebrate the sacred mysteries, with priests assisting. The bishop had his chair in the center of the rear of the apse, as the Roman judges did. As time went on, it became inconvenient for the bishop to move through all the priests and deacons to fulfill his part of the ritual. The altar was moved to the rear wall of the apse and the bishop’s chair was moved to the epistle side of the altar in parishes. One fallacy spread today by liturgists is that Mass was said facing the people in the early Church. In reality, in the homes, the U-shaped table precluded that. Pope Pius XII condemned *antiquarianism* or *archeologism* in his encyclical of 11/20/1947, *Mediator Dei*. Antiquarianism is disregarding tradition (that which is handed down) in favor of reaching back to earlier times to revive dead practices. Continuity is lost. In the case of Mass allegedly said facing the people, we have a complete fabrication to suit the agenda of modernists.

We also know that the early Christians faced east in their liturgies. When the altars were free-standing, as St. Peter’s in Rome is to this day, when the Canon of the Mass was prayed both the priest and the people faced **east** – that is, in the same direction. Whether the east was true east or symbolic east, because Christ will return to us from the east, the celebrant was facing the direction of Christ’s coming. The people faced that same direction, called *ad orientem*. When the priest celebrates facing the people today, we have a community closed in on itself, with no directional orientation and have lost our Christological symbol of the Second Coming completely. (The problem of the community closed in on itself can be ameliorated by the interposing of a crucifix on or in front of the altar between the priest and the people, as suggested by Cardinal Ratzinger in several of his books on the liturgy. It does not, however, solve the problem of the lost symbolism of *ad orientem*.)

During the reading of the epistles and the Gospel throughout the ages, the sacred ministers faced the people as is done today at the Solemn High Masses in the Traditional Latin Mass. Most of the Mass was sung or chanted for centuries.



As the centuries progressed and the Church deepened her understanding of the Mystery of the Eucharist, altars became more ornate, made of beautiful carved marble or wood. Sanctuaries, pillars, and walls along with stained glass windows depicting saints or episodes in the life of Christ, etc. reflected the faithful’s desire to honor as completely as possible the Most Beautiful One. The altar was so sacred, no objects were permitted to be stored under it or in it.

## Contemporary practices undercut the sacred meaning

“The Eucharist is above all else a sacrifice.” “All who participate with faith in the Eucharist become aware that it is a ‘sacrifice,’ that is to say, a ‘consecrated Offering.’... – Pope John Paul II, *Dominicae Cenaе*, #9.

One of many lamentable practices that has arisen in the past 35 years is furnishing sanctuaries with boxy looking butcher-block type tables, evoking the idea of a “supper” and calling them altars. This, together with the use of crystal goblets and pitchers instead of chalices made according to lawful specifications further encourage the faithful to think that we have only a “communal meal” and not a sacrifice to God the Father which we then partake of unifying ourselves as individuals with Christ and His Church, the People of God.

Pope John Paul II tells us in *Redemptor Hominis* (3/4/1979) in #20.4 that “It is not permissible for us, in thought, life or action, to take away from this truly most holy Sacrament its full magnitude and its essential meaning. It is at one and the same time a Sacrifice-Sacrament, a Communion-Sacrament, and a Presence-Sacrament. And, although it is true that the Eucharist always was and must continue to be the most profound revelation of the human brotherhood of Christ’s disciples and confessors, **it cannot be treated merely as an ‘occasion’ for manifesting this brotherhood.**” [*Ed. Emphasis*]

When the faithful are given predominantly “table of the Lord” music set to pop tunes to sing at communion, questionable altar structures, and sacred vessels reminiscent of the china cabinet, along with gratuitous changes, additions and omissions by the celebrant, the Eucharistic Sacrifice becomes not a true Thanksgiving but a mockery of Calvary. At the altar we are at a solemn religious ceremony, not at the dining room table.

As Michael O’Brien says in his essay, “Harry Potter and the Paganization of Children’s Culture,” in the April, 2001 *Catholic World Report*, “Traditionally, the signs, sacraments, and rituals of the Christian world were a means of encountering God, and a way for man to find his place in the hierarchy of being – a hierarchy leading all the way up to the throne of his Father-Creator... [H]ave most Christians in the developed nations become practical materialists? It would seem so, if we are little more than consumers of religious experience, rather than adorers and obedient servants of the living God.”

This is where the compromise of secular culture in the sanctuary leads us. As a worshipping congregation, we have become practical materialists, while our capability of comprehending transcendental mysteries has been anesthetized. We must return to the beautiful, worthy altar structures the Church used for Her sacred rites before the minimalists took over, remembering that we are in the courts of the Lord (Psalm 83) in the presence of Justice and Mercy, offering the Perfect Sacrifice to God the Father and fulfilling Christ’s admonition: “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink His blood, you shall not have life in you.” (John 6: 53) Nothing can be too beautiful nor too precious to express the honor, love, and devotion due our Creator and Redeemer. **XXX -- BAS**

## *From the President...*

At our April meeting we had people who came all the way from Gainesville and Dora. In previous months we have had people attending from as far away as Birch Tree. God bless all those who are making the sacrifice to drive these distances. Also, every month we are adding names to our mailing list.

Again, I remind everyone that our Una Voce picnic is Sunday, June 10, 2001 at Living Memorial Park from 11:00 – 3:00. We want everyone who supports our endeavors to come, even if you haven’t been able to attend the meetings. Please call Mary Bird, 417-888-2462 to let her know how many will be in your party. There will be games for the kids and grown ups, too. This is a good time to say also that we really miss our members who have moved out of the area. We know the Thigpens, Petersens, and Henzes will be with us in spirit.

## The Wanderer Article

In February, 2000, I contacted The Wanderer newspaper to follow up on an article they had published. I don’t remember now what I was pursuing. However, they gave me Paul Likoudis’s phone number. When I was talking with Paul, I mentioned our Una Voce chapter and what we were doing. He asked me to send him

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information as he thought it would make a good story. At that time, I asked that he not write anything about us, as we had not made a formal request for the Traditional Mass.

In March, 2001, I contacted Paul on a Planned Parenthood story concept after *The Wanderer* had published a pro-life-oriented issue. He asked for complete documentation on our chapter since we had a formal appeal in to Rome concerning our situation. That is how the article came to be written. I did not solicit the coverage, but I submitted full documentation once he decided to write the story. It ran in the Easter issue of April 12, 2001.

Please subscribe to *The Wanderer*. It is a must for understanding what is going on in the Church in America, as well as in politics. In other words, you get the viewpoint of the teachings of the Church in relation to everyday religious and secular life. Subscribe by calling 651-224-5733. The cost is \$40 per year and well worth it. I don't believe we can call ourselves informed Catholics without this paper. It has been indispensable to me in assessing trends in the hierarchy and the mind of Rome as well as observing how other lay groups are confronting problems in their dioceses around the country.

We have received email and phone calls from around the country offering prayers and encouragement as a result of the *Wanderer* article. In recent correspondence with a Protonotary Apostolic, a Monsignor working in the Apostolic Signatura who is sympathetic to those who desire the Traditional Mass, I was told that we will not hear from Commission *Ecclesia Dei* for some time. This is actually good news, because it means that eventually we will hear *something*. We cannot underestimate the positive effect the 1000 pilgrims celebrating the 10th anniversary of *Ecclesia Dei* in 1998 had on the Curia, nor the 6000 SSPX pilgrims in the Jubilee Year.

Since the talks with the SSPX have been suspended by Rome, it is possible that the now beefed up Commission is working on solutions to problems faced by all Catholics desiring the Traditional Mass. Canon law contains provisions which the Pope can enact if he chooses, but these things take study and time. We must remember that the Holy Father has the whole world for his diocese and we are not the only ones in it. Meanwhile, we must continue fasting, praying, and studying, making pilgrimages to the Mass whenever we can, and helping each other to grow in holiness. Let's also remember our diocesan priests and the bishop in our prayers and pray for reconciliation with the SSPX.

## Marianfest

**Our May program is dedicated to Our Lady.** The children's choir will lead us in both Eucharistic and Marian hymns which have been expunged from the repertoire of our parishes in the past 35 years. Some hymns will be from the Divine Office. Most will seem "new", but they are nearly all from the treasury of the Church. We will learn the story behind this rich and varied heritage, plus how "inculturation" can be used to convert indigenous music of peoples to sacred expressions of Catholic faith. We will sing both Latin and English hymns and learn what the Vatican II Constitution on the Liturgy said about sacred music. The young people of *Una Voce* have worked hard on their music and want to share it with everyone. Please set aside the evening of May 16 to honor Our Lady, celebrate our inheritance, and have a wonderful, grace-filled evening.



## One Million Rosaries to End Abortion!!!

Please join this pro-life prayer event in your own homes or in a chapel or church. On May 12 (Saturday), it is hoped that one million people will pray the Joyful Mysteries for an end to the surgical and non-surgical killing of unborn babies. We are all to be praying at the exact same time. The times are: 8:00- 9:00 am Central Daylight Time, (9:00 EDT, 7:00 MDT, 6:00 PDT). Please pass this on and try to get it posted in your parishes. A nation that kills its babies cannot survive. **XXX**

Barbara A. Schoeneberger



## Does the New GIRM Discourage Celebrating *Ad Orientem*?

When many of us were told in last summer's news release concerning the GIRM 2000 that the Mass should be celebrated facing the people "whenever possible," we were stunned. After all the books and lectures given by Cardinal Ratzinger concerning the *ad orientem* position and the fine scholarship presented to dicastery heads by CIEL, we wondered how Cardinal Medina Estevez could possibly have thrown out 2000 years of tradition. Especially after he had overturned Bishop Foley's folly of prohibiting the celebration of the Mass *ad orientem* in his diocese. With all the evidence of the modernists' agendas being served by the liturgical establishment in the United States and elsewhere with full complicity of many bishops, we were justly suspicious. Now from an Anglican Latinist, Rev. J.W. Hunwicke of Lancing College, Sussex England, we have the truth unveiled. The excerpts here we cite from a letter published in the January *Catholic World Report*.

He calls the translation "illiterate" and says: "Consider the phrase: *Quod expedit ubicumque possibile sit*. *Quod* is neuter. So it cannot possibly have as its antecedent *celebratio (versus populum)*, which is feminine. *Quod* clearly refers to the preceding sentence as a whole, where the crucial term is *possit*. In GIRM this verb is commonly used for things which are **genuinely optional**." [Ed. Emphasis]

He then translates Paragraph 299 and includes his commentary:

"The High Altar [not, be it observed, every altar] should be constructed away from the wall, so that the option is open [*possit*] of walking easily around it and using it for Mass facing the people. This [i.e., having the altar free-standing so that the options are open] is desirable wherever possible."

The Reverend tells us that the GIRM continues to accept "that there will be churches where keeping the options open in this way is not 'possible.' And notice that according to the Oxford Latin Dictionary, *ubicumque* means only *wherever*." [not *whenever* – Ed.]

Hunwicke also notes three places, (#s 154, 181, 195) in addition to already existing text in the previous GIRM where the instructions are given that at certain points the priest or deacon must be "turned to the people" (*versus ad populum*), **clearly implying that he may lawfully be turned away from them at other times.**

He then comments, "Incidentally, I suspect that a redaction critic, asked why the *quod* ... clause has been added, might surmise that the addition was intended to emphasize the need for flexibility in the placing of the altar (it's a good idea [*expedit*] to have a free-standing altar where this doesn't cause too much trouble), rather than to discourage *ad orientem*."

So now we have the rest of the story and a clear example of why a new document must be read within the context of a previous document to understand fully the intent of the changes, and why news releases should not be taken as the gospel truth. **XXX**

Barbara A. Schoeneberger



### Psalm 73 (74)

Why, O God, have you cast us off forever?

Why does your anger smolder against the sheep of your pasture?

Remember your flock which you built up of old, the tribe you redeemed as your inheritance,

Mount Sion, where you took up your abode.

Turn your steps toward the utter ruins:

Toward all the damage the enemy has done in the sanctuary.

Your foes roar triumphantly in your shrine;

They have set up their tokens of victory.

They are like men coming up with axes to a clump of trees;

And now with chisel and hammer they hack at all its paneling.

They set your sanctuary on fire;

The place where your name abides they have razed and profaned.

They said in their hearts,

"Let us destroy them; burn all the shrines of God in the land."



THE SWORD OF THE SPIRIT

Deeds on our behalf we do not see;  
 There is no prophet now, and no one of us knows how long...  
 How long, O God, shall the foe blaspheme?  
 Shall the enemy revile your name forever?  
 Why draw back your hand  
 and keep your right hand idle beneath your cloak?  
 Yet, O God, my king from of old,  
 You doer of saving deeds on earth,  
 You stirred up the sea by your might;  
 You smashed the heads of the dragons in the waters.  
 You crushed the heads of Leviathan,  
 And made food of him for the dolphins.  
 You released the springs and torrents;  
 You brought dry land out of the primeval waters.  
 Yours is the day, and yours the night;  
 You fashioned the moon and the sun.  
 You fixed all the limits of the land;  
 Summer and winter you made.  
 Remember how the enemy has blasphemed you, O Lord,  
 And how a stupid people has reviled your name.  
 Give not to the vulture the life of your dove;  
 Be not forever unmindful of the lives of your afflicted ones.  
 Look to your covenant,  
 For the hiding places in the land and the plains are full of violence.  
 May the humble not retire in confusion;  
 May the afflicted and the poor praise your name.  
 Arise, O God; defend your cause;  
 Remember how the fool blasphemes you day after day.  
 Be not unmindful of the voice of your foes;  
 The uproar of those who rebel against you is unceasing.



This beautiful psalm is from Matins of Holy Thursday in the 1962 Divine Office. The translation is from the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C., published in the early 1960s and is more graphic than even the RSV or the Douay. The late Father John Hardon, S. J., used this version in his lectures. (Father Hardon's cause for beatification is advancing under the offices of Cardinal Gagnon in Rome.)

St. Robert Bellarmine expounds on it in relation to 2 Maccabees, which would benefit all of us to read and take to heart. It seems appropriate to pray this psalm often for the Church, the restoration of the Traditional Mass, and the establishment of a Christ-centered world. – *Ed.*



**Good is never done except at the expense of those who do it: truth is never enforced except at the sacrifice of its propounders.**

*John Henry Cardinal Newman*