

Restoring the Cathedral of St. Michael and St. John

THE ALTAR



The Altar is a fixed, freestanding table and is the central focus for the celebration of the Eucharist. It is both Altar and table. As an Altar, it is the place of sacrifice, where Christ, who was sacrificed on the cross for us, becomes present again under the sacramental form of bread and wine. As a table, it gathers the people of God to share the Body and Blood of Christ, their holiest meal, which recalls the Passover and grants a foretaste of the heavenly banquet.

The Altar is the location of the Liturgy of the Eucharist, that part of the Mass beginning with the Preparation of the Gifts, including the Offertory Procession and concluding with the Great Amen after the Eucharistic Prayer.

It is on the Altar that the bread and wine are placed for consecration and it is at the Altar that the priest stands as he proclaims the Eucharistic Prayer. It is from the Altar that the people are nourished with the body and blood of Christ.

Out of reverence for the celebration at the Altar, it is clothed with a white cloth, at times honoured with incense, venerated with a bow and greeted with a kiss by the ordained.

The Altar is traditionally made of stone, but it may be constructed of another solid, well-crafted material such as wood or metal, which establishes its beauty and dignity. Its rectangular shape suited the liturgy before the Second Vatican Council, when the Scriptures were read from the sides of the Altar.

Today's Altar is often more square to accommodate the priest, the bread and the wine.

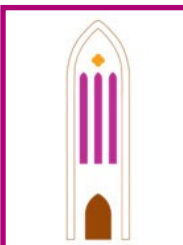
The Altar should be located in a church so that it is 'truly the centre toward which the attention of the whole congregation is naturally' focussed and aids in the full, conscious and active participation of the faithful in the liturgy.

When the Altar of a church is consecrated, the bishop anoints its top with chrism. Chrism is the perfumed oil we reserve for the sacraments that are celebrated only once in one's lifetime: baptism, confirmation and ordination. The consecration of an Altar sets it apart permanently for its sacred purpose. In conjunction with this anointing, the Altar also represents Jesus, whose title "Christ" means "anointed."

The Altar and the Word of God have an important relationship in the Eucharist. This relationship is visible when the Book of the Gospels is placed on the Altar at the beginning of Mass and it is from the Altar that it is taken up for the proclamation of the Gospel at the Ambo.

In the past, the Altar was located against the rear wall, and the priest celebrated Mass with his back to the people. Additional Altars were often located in chapels around the church, permitting other priests to celebrate separate Masses at the same time. Today, a church should have one Altar, freestanding so the priest may walk completely around it. It should be permanently fixed to reflect the stability of our faith (General Instruction of the Roman Missal 299).

The front section of the current Altar at the Cathedral, featuring a relief of Jesus fallen on the road to Calvary, was originally the front of the old Altar, which is located behind the cathedra. In the 1983 renovation, the current Altar was made with new marble and the relief of Jesus.



The restoration of the Cathedral is an opportune time to look at the internal arrangement of the building and focus on the liturgical suitability of the furnishings and space.

This article is part 2 of a series of articles that explain the importance and meaning of the liturgical furniture and their context in the Cathedral.

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