

Liturgy Lesson 2: The Altar

Historically, the altar has had a central place in any religion which had sacrifice as a principle practice. Also, in religions where a meal was very important, such as the Jewish faith, the table was considered sacred. By the Fourth Century our altar was called "the Table of the Lord." Our Catholic altar is a symbol of both actions: it is the place where we remember and represent our Lord's sacrifice of Calvary, and it is the table from which we receive the Bread and Wine of Life, Jesus' sacred body and blood.

With all of that history and meaning, the priest enters the sanctuary and bows and kisses the altar as a sign of reverence. The priest may also incense the altar as the holy place of sacrifice from which our offerings rise to God.

Some of us will remember that Catholic altars also contained relics of martyrs, pieces of bone or cloth associated with a saint who had died for the faith. That practice started centuries ago, probably because during times of persecution Mass was celebrated in catacombs and a tomb was used as the altar. It is no longer required that an altar contain a relic, though our altar does have an altar stone with a relic enclosed inside.

Great reverence is given to the altar in our Catholic Church because the altar is not just seen as merely a table, but because Christ makes himself present there in the Eucharistic bread and wine and we remember his sacrifice for us, the altar is seen as a sign of Christ himself. Or as it is sometimes said, the altar is Christ. For this reason, only bread, wine and the sacramentary properly belong on the altar.