

Nourished at the Altar, Called to a Life of Grace

Ronald Patrick Raab

May the Lord by his power,
sanctify this altar and this house,
which by our ministry we anoint,
so that as visible signs
they may express the mystery of Christ
and the Church.

—*The Order of the Dedication of a Church
and an Altar*

MAY THE LORD BY HIS POWER

On May 23, 2018, Bishop Michael Sheridan dedicated our restored Sacred Heart Church in Colorado Springs, Colorado. During the ceremony, he poured a half-bottle of sacred Chrism from a crystal vessel onto the new altar. Slowly, he smeared the thick oil into the solid oak with his fingers and palms. This moment of blessing brought the assembly to silence. The altar was being readied for sacrifice, blessed for the consecration of bread and wine, the action that will take place upon the altar for many years to come.

Even to this day, as I bend toward the altar for the kiss, I smell the aroma of Chrism from the dark altar. The lingering aroma of consecration reminds me of that night when we gathered in our restored church for the first time, when people saw the new handmade furniture after a year of celebrating Mass in our former gym. The smell reminds me that the completed project was the work of the entire community, among them the artists who worked long hours designing, sanding, staining, and installing all of the furniture in the church.

The altar, standing in the center of the sanctuary, offers the history of the local community. For years, members of Sacred Heart will remember when the altar was built and how the community awaited its installation. Those who witnessed the dedication of the altar will tell the story to new parishioners. We celebrate the Real Presence of Christ Jesus from our altars to feed us in all the ways in which each generation needs God. The altar itself reminds us of our particular story of faith as well as it unites the People of God in every generation. The altar commissions us to live the message of hope, forgiveness, and mercy in our world.

SANCTIFY THIS ALTAR AND THIS HOUSE,

As the action of the Eucharist takes place upon the altar, hope radiates from the focal point of the community. Sometimes,



The Chrism poured and soaked into the altar during the Order of Dedication of a Church and an Altar readies the altar for the sacrifice of the Mass.

Photo by Ron Johnston

though, we liturgical ministers, who are often near the altar, may take for granted its message of holiness and unity. Even with reverencing the altar with a bow, a kiss, or a genuflection every time we enter the church building or begin the Mass, the meaning of the altar may become overlooked. Taking time to reflect on the role of the altar may become an experience of renewal for those of us who prepare the Eucharist.

Made of stone or another becoming and solid material, the altar stands with integrity in the worship space. It speaks with authority from the earth, whispering from stone or wood that God continues to create with the hands of men and women. The altar represents Christ Jesus, the Living Stone. It is both “the table of the Lord to which the People of God is convoked to participate in the Mass” and “the center of thanksgiving accomplished through the Eucharist” (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, 296). Such status deems that it be a worthy piece of art. The artistry of the piece gives expression to the Incarnation, the Word-made-flesh. It speaks boldly the truth of the Real Presence of Christ Jesus, calling all life, including all sin and division, into his love.

In our continuing liturgical renewal, we need to ensure that our decoration of the worship space respects the nobility, beauty, strength, and simplicity of the altar. It cannot be viewed

as the background to a display of lilies at Easter or poinsettias at Christmas or the tabletop to hang a banner on at a First Communion liturgy. We need to take care that any decor is respectful of the altar as representing Christ.

WHICH BY OUR MINISTRY WE ANOINT,

The altar is the place from which we receive the Real Presence of Christ Jesus. The Eucharist shows us how to live the mission of the Church. In the sacrament, we receive Jesus Christ, with whom we are united in his passion, death, and Resurrection. From the Fifteenth through the Twenty-First Sundays in Ordinary Time, the Gospel readings from Luke show how the Eucharist reveals our salvation and how it becomes food for people who desperately search for God.

SO THAT AS VISIBLE SIGNS

As people born again in Baptism, we are reminded at Eucharist of our earthly mission to bring the hope of heaven into our daily lives. I believe that art and service are primarily the same events, for they both bring hope. The art of the altar within our churches offers solace and communion. Service to bring justice in our world opens up hope for people lost among society's margins. Both art and service are needed to live the message of the Church, the place where genuine hope is received and lived in our world. In other words, the Real Presence from our altars shows us how to live the message of Christ in every age and situation well beyond our sanctuaries.

The meaning of the Eucharist connects worship and service to others. The People of God pray so that they may know the love that calls them to enter the unsatisfied human condition. The Eucharist offers the food and love needed for healing so that the broken and marginalized may be served unceasingly. Luke's Gospel continues to reveal that we are to live simply in the world so that others may find the kingdom. We are to take few supplies into the world from the altar to invite workers for the harvest, to cure the sick and offer hope for the hopeless.

Upon our altars in the celebration and action of the Eucharist lies the love and forgiveness of God. This love is manifest in our hearts so we may learn how to love in our world. A scholar of the law in Luke's Gospel (10:25–37, Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time), asks Jesus how to inherit eternal life. Jesus tells him to love God with his entire heart, mind, and strength. Then he adds something else. He tells the man to love his neighbor as he loves his own life. This is key to the Eucharist. From the altar, we learn how to love through receiving Christ Jesus. Without this love from God, our lives as Christians would be flimsy and self-indulgent. Love manifest from our altar tables changes the world.

Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38–42, Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time) teach us how to pray and serve. We also learn the motivation to arise in the middle of night to offer a loaf of bread to someone who knocks on our door (11:1–13, Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time) because we know intimately what the Eucharist does for us. We know not to store up treasures on earth because our real treasure comes from above (12:13–21,

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time and 12:32–48, Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time) from the Eucharist and our inner prayer. Luke's Gospel shows us that division is inevitable, dividing mother and daughters, even dividing households (12:49–53, Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time).

THEY MAY EXPRESS THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST AND THE CHURCH

The meaning of the sacrifice of Christ Jesus is continued on our altars in our daily lives. Christ offered his life to reveal love and forgiveness in every generation. Upon our altar is a flash of heaven, a glimpse into how we are to live on earth. We receive the peace of Christ Jesus from the heavenly realm and then are challenged to live such peace in our world. Peace is offered for our relationships, our world events, and for how we treat one another.

At the altar, we are fed with forgiveness and love. We feed others with these heavenly gifts and live our faith in the world. In every action of forgiveness, we glimpse the miracle of the Eucharist. The table of plenty feeds us in ways that each person needs to be fed. The availability of God to feed us is unlimited. We are compelled to live such a gift in our culture that is torn apart by loneliness, injustice, and hopelessness. God is ready to convert our hearts so that our healing may become a source of hope for people who may not even be aware of their need for God. The Cup of Salvation is shared so that we may be in union with others and work for people caught in sin and addiction. We taste the sweetness of God's presence in the Bread of Life so as to feed people starving from war, bereft from the shooting of the innocent, and seeking solace from the devastating effects of floods, fires, and storms.

With plentiful grace, the Lord is ready for all who hunger and thirst. Hope fills the emptiness of our hearts in every generation. In offering the Mass, we pray the Eucharist, knowing God is present for people in every situation today. The dedication of the altar does not expire, nor does the grace of Chrism dry up.

The Eucharist does not take us back into the past in language and ritual and leave us there, for we rely on God's abundant grace and presence to heal our lives today and every day. The altar is an eternal symbol and reality that God remains at the core of human existence, ready to feed us with love. This love is food that cannot be duplicated. Eucharist is to be received with joy. Hope manifest on our altars and lived in the world is a work of art. We are challenged to share this bountiful hope because we are the Body of Christ on earth. ♦

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