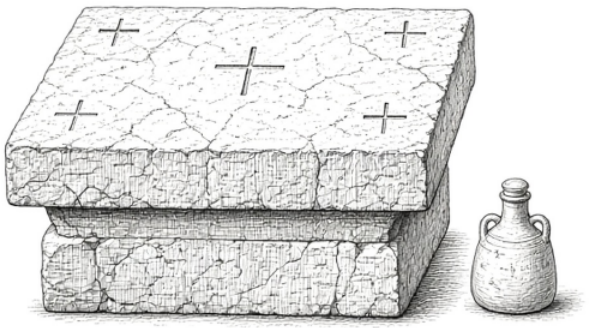
SILENT HOMILIES

The Alphabet on the Floor

What happens when a church is consecrated



Silent Homilies

Little Treasures

The Alphabet on the Floor

What happens when a church is dedicated

Before You Begin

†

This is not a long book, and it is not meant to be. Most of us have walked into a church for years without asking what was done to the building before we arrived.

What follows is that day. Some of it belongs to the rite the Church uses now, the Order of the Dedication of a Church and an Altar. Some of it belongs to the older Roman Pontifical, the bishop's book that governed these things for centuries. I will say which is which. The old ceremonies are not still required. They are here because they show what the Church was trying to say, and because one of them gives this book its title.

Read it, and then look at the walls of your own church. If there are small crosses high up, with a place for a candle beneath them, you are looking at the signature of that day.

Contents

Before You Begin 4

1. When a Building Gets a Name 6

2. Dedication, Not a Ribbon 9

3. Knocking on a Locked Door 11

4. Water That Means Business 13

5. The Alphabet on the Floor 15

6. Relics under the Altar 18

7. Chrism on Stone 20

8. Twelve Crosses, Twelve Lights 22

9. Incense, Cloth, Fire, and Mass 24

10. What Cannot Be Done Here Afterwards 26

A Last Word 28

Sources and Further Reading 29

Keep a Light beneath the Cross 30

Chapter 1

When a Building Gets a Name

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A church can be used for Mass after a blessing. Dedication is something else. You may have noticed that people still say a church has been consecrated. That is the older word, and it is not wrong. The present book says dedicated. Either way, the claim is the same. The Church says, in public and for as long as the walls stand, that this house is no longer an ordinary room. It has a title. It has an altar that will not go back to being a table. It has walls that have been marked.

Why mark a building at all? St Peter calls Christians living stones, and St Paul calls the Church God's temple. The people are the living temple. The rite never forgets that. God does not need a house. He is not short of rooms. And yet we need places set apart for Him. The faith is about a God who took flesh, so it has never been embarrassed by stone, water, oil and wood. Israel met Him in a tent, and then in the Temple Solomon built and anointed. Christians meet Him under a roof they have asked Him to make His own.

A warehouse with chairs is not yet that. A beautiful hall is not yet that. Something has to be done, and said, and signed. Jacob, on the road, set up the stone he had used as a pillow and poured oil on it, and called the place Bethel, the house of God. He was not inventing church architecture. He was refusing to walk away from a meeting as if the ground had not changed.

Every dedicated church keeps the anniversary of that day. In a church that has been dedicated, the anniversary is kept as a feast of the place itself. That is how seriously the Church takes a morning most parishioners could not describe if you asked them at the door. If your

church has small crosses on the walls, with brackets for candles, you are looking at the signature of that day. They are the scars of a wedding. Once you have seen them as that, it is hard to treat the nave as a hall that happens to have a pretty ceiling.

Reflection

The walls of a parish were prayed over before you arrived. They may still be standing after you die. That is an odd thing to belong to, if you have only ever thought of a church as the place you go on Sunday.

Somebody chose the title. Somebody paid for the stone. Somebody you will never meet knelt here on the morning the bishop came. You inherit the house. You did not build it, and you are not free to treat it as if the asking never happened.

The next time you are early, sit for a minute and look at the walls rather than at your phone. You are in a room that was named. The people who named it are mostly gone. The name is not.

A Short Prayer

Lord, You asked for a house of prayer. Teach us to treat the walls as if You meant it. Amen.

Chapter 2

Dedication, Not a Ribbon

†

When a civic building opens, someone cuts a ribbon. The Church anoints. The difference is not a matter of taste. A ribbon says: we have finished the work. Chrism says: the work now belongs to Christ, whose very title means the Anointed.

A blessing of a church may be given by a priest the bishop sends. The solemn dedication is done by the bishop of the diocese. He may entrust it to another bishop. He comes as the man whose hands already know how to set things apart, because he also confirms and ordains. The current book is called the Order of the Dedication of a Church and an Altar. Older Catholics still say consecration. The words have shifted. The claim has not.

After this day the building is a sacred place. Canon Law does not forbid every gathering that is not Mass. It does say that a sacred place is for divine worship, and that anything else done there must not be contrary to the holiness of the place. A jumble sale on the altar, or a concert that treats the sanctuary as a stage, is not a grey area. A talk, or music that can be offered without dishonouring the house, is a different question, and the bishop's law for the diocese often settles the details. Sacred space is not a mood you put on for Sunday. It is a legal and liturgical fact.

People sometimes find this fussy. There is a reason for the fuss. You do not hand a house to God with a dustpan and a handshake. You prepare it, you ask, and you sign the walls so that later generations cannot pretend the asking never happened.

Reflection

The people who built a church had a strange job at the end of it. They gave it away. The keys are handed to the bishop, and the building stops being only the committee's achievement.

That is harder than it sounds. Parishes pay for roofs, and then have to remember that the roof is not theirs in the way a hall is theirs. They still have to mend it. They may no longer use it for whatever the diary finds convenient.

If you have ever helped to raise money for a church, this is the other half of the gift. You were not buying a room. You were helping to hand one over.

A Short Prayer

Jesus, Anointed One, take this house from our hands and keep it. Amen.

Chapter 3

Knocking on a Locked Door

†

In the older Roman Pontifical, the day began outside. The church was shut. A deacon waited within. The bishop came to the door, struck it three times with his staff, and sang the psalm that asks who shall climb the mountain of the Lord, and who shall stand in His holy place. From inside, the deacon answered. The doors opened. Psalm 24 was not being used as a hymn for a committee. It was being used as a question at a threshold.

The present Order is simpler, and it should not be confused with that knocking. Today the people gather, often elsewhere, and process to the new church. Representatives of those who have worked on the building hand it over. The bishop calls on the priest of the place to open the door. There is still a threshold, and there is still a giving. There is no longer a bishop demanding entrance of a deacon locked inside.

The old ceremony is worth keeping in mind, because of what it refused to say. The bishop did not stroll in as the owner. He stood outside his own diocese's newest church and asked. Grace is given. It is not seized. Even the man with the staff had to knock.

Eusebius, writing after Constantine, describes cities keeping the dedication of new churches as a public feast. The Church has been making a day of this since she was first allowed to build in the open. The knocking came later, and then it went. The instinct stayed: do not treat the door as already yours.

Reflection

The bishop himself stands outside and knocks. That is an unusual picture of authority, and it is easy to miss if you only remember the mitre.

Christian authority is given so that it can hand things on, not so that it can take them. A bishop who dedicates a church is not decorating his own property. He is asking God to receive a house the people have built, and he has to receive the keys before he can anoint the walls.

If you have any charge in a parish, the door is a useful memory. You do not own the room because you hold the keys. You hold the keys so that other people can come in.

A Short Prayer

Lord of the gates, teach us to knock, and to open. Amen.

Chapter 4

Water That Means Business

†

Before the walls are anointed, they are washed. In the present rite the bishop sprinkles the people, then the walls, then the altar, with holy water. It is a cleansing, and a remembering of Baptism. The people who will worship here have already passed through water. The building is being brought into the same family of signs.

The older Roman rite used a stranger water, and it is no longer prescribed. It was called Gregorian water. The name is later than the mixture. It was only in the fourteenth century that people began to attach it to Pope St Gregory the Great, and the attachment is not secure. What is secure is the recipe the Pontifical eventually fixed: water, salt, ashes and wine. Water and salt were already used in blessings. Wine was added in the early Middle Ages, and ash after that. The bishop blessed the elements, mixed them, and sprinkled the church and the altar. Some of the same water went into the mortar that sealed the relics under the altar.

Later writers loved to give each ingredient a meaning: water for cleansing, salt for preservation, ash for humility, wine for joy. Treat those as comments, not as the reason the rite began. We know what was mixed. We should be slower about why each thing was chosen. The mix is not chemistry. It is a sentence the old rite wanted to say over a building: this room is being set apart.

It is fair to say that dedication is a little like a baptism for a building. It is also important to say what that does not mean. A building does not receive a sacrament. It does not become a member of the Church. The water is a sign, not a second font. The people are baptised. The walls are blessed.

Reflection

We bless walls because Christianity does not despise matter. Bread can become the Eucharist. Oil can mark a priest. Water can be the sign of a new birth. Stone can be asked to serve.

That has a smaller cousin in ordinary life, and it is easy to lose. A table where grace is said is not an altar. It is also not nothing. A room where a family prays has not been dedicated by a bishop. It has still been used for something other than storage.

You do not need to anoint the kitchen. You do need to notice that the faith has never thought God was interested only in thoughts.

A Short Prayer

Lord, You used water, and oil, and stone. Do not let us live as if You had not. Amen.

Chapter 5

The Alphabet on the Floor

†

This is the ceremony that gives the book its name, and it is not in the present rite. If you see a bishop dedicate a church this year, you will not see him write on the floor. In the older Roman Pontifical, you would have.

Ashes, or sometimes sand, were spread on the pavement in two long lines, crossing in the form of a great X, the cross associated with St Andrew. The bishop took his crozier in both hands. From the left-hand corner of the entrance he wrote the Greek alphabet in the ashes, walking toward the right-hand corner by the altar. Then, from the right-hand corner of the entrance, he wrote the Latin alphabet toward the left-hand corner by the altar. The two languages crossed in the middle of the nave. Sometimes, in other medieval books, only one alphabet was written, twice. Sometimes Hebrew was added as a third. It was not done in exactly the same way in every place.

We know what the bishop did. Why the ceremony first arose is less certain. Notices of letters traced at a dedication go back a long way, and by the Middle Ages the Greek and Latin alphabets on the crossed lines were the Roman form. Historians do not agree on a single origin. Some have connected it with the old Roman way of marking out land. Some have seen a blessing of the whole floor, letter by letter, so that no corner of the house was left out. Both may have played a part. The rite itself does not stop to explain.

What the Church later saw in it is easier to say, so long as we call it an interpretation. Greek and Latin were the two great languages of Christian Scripture, worship and teaching in the world that built these

churches. To write both on the floor was to say that East and West, the languages of the faith, were being laid down in this room. Christ is the Word. Human speech, in this house, was being handed over before a sermon had been preached in it. The beautiful reading is not a guess about the inventor. It is what the signs were fit to mean: every letter we will ever use here already belongs to Him.

The old ceremony has disappeared. The present Order does not ask for ashes or alphabets. Its meaning helps us understand what a dedicated church still is. Words will be spoken here that are not ordinary words. Sins will be forgiven. Vows will be made. Scripture will be proclaimed. Bread will be consecrated. The floor no longer receives the alphabet. The house still receives the language.

Reflection

Words spoken in a church can forgive sins, make a vow, proclaim the Gospel and consecrate the Eucharist. That is a heavy use of language, and it is easy to forget once the microphone is switched on.

The old bishop, writing letters in ash, was handing the floor over before anyone preached in it. We do not do that now. We still have the responsibility he was pointing at. A lie told in a porch, a cruel joke in a pew, a reading rattled through as if it were a notice: these sit oddly in a house whose floor was once given its letters.

You do not need ashes to remember it. You need to hear yourself. The building was dedicated. The sentences spoken in it were meant to be dedicated too.

A Short Prayer

Lord, the alphabet was Yours before we spoke. Keep the words of this house true. Amen.

Chapter 6

Relics under the Altar

†

The first churches were not all built on tombs. That sentence needs saying, because the devotion is older than the slogan. Christians did celebrate at the graves of martyrs, and great basilicas were raised over those graves. St Peter's stands where Peter was buried. The practice of placing relics in other altars grew from that. By the time the Roman rite of consecration was fully formed, a fixed altar was not consecrated without relics of martyrs. The bishop sealed them into a small opening in the stone, the sepulchre, often with a record of what had been done.

The Bible had already given the Church a picture. In Revelation, John sees the souls of those killed for the word of God, under the altar in heaven. The earthly custom is a cousin of that vision, not a proof of it. The martyrs had united their death to Christ, so the Church placed what remained of them beneath the place of His sacrifice, not above it.

The present rite is gentler about the obligation, and it should not be described as if the old law were still in force. It is fitting that relics of martyrs or of other saints be placed beneath the altar. It is no longer absolutely required. If they are used, they are to be authentic, and of a suitable size to be recognised as relics of a saint's body, not a scrap too small to venerate honestly. They are placed in a casket, often with a copy of the record of the dedication, during the rite, after the litany and before the prayer of dedication. A sliver of bone is not magic. It is a reminder with weight.

You may hear Mass for years and never know the name under the altar. Somebody is there whom the parish has forgotten how to introduce.

Reflection

A saint whose relic lies under an altar may be unknown to nearly everybody receiving Communion above it. The name may be in a document in the diocesan archive. It may be St Agnes, or a martyr whose story fills half a page, or a name you would not recognise.

God is not dependent on the parish newsletter. The person under the stone is remembered where memory does not fail. That is a useful thought on a morning when you feel invisible in the third pew.

You do not have to become a relic to be held in that company. You have to be joined to the same Christ. The altar is where that joining is fed.

A Short Prayer

Lord of the martyrs, remember the names we have mislaid. Amen.

Chapter 7

Chrism on Stone

†

After the prayer of dedication, the bishop anoints. In the present rite he pours sacred chrism on the middle of the altar and on each of the four corners, and it is praiseworthy for him to anoint the whole top of the altar as well. Then he anoints the walls at the crosses prepared for that day. Priests may help him with the walls. The oil is the same chrism used at Baptism, Confirmation and the ordination of priests. Christ means the Anointed One. The house is being signed with His title.

The older Pontifical was more exacting about the count. Twelve crosses on the inside walls were anointed, and that anointing was treated as the heart of the consecration. The present rite keeps twelve as the full number, and also allows four. I will come back to that.

Oil soaks in. That is part of the theology, and it is not only a poet's remark. Chrism does not sit on stone the way a poster sits on a wall. It enters the pores and then disappears from sight. The dedication does something like that to a house. You cannot point to the grace. You can point to the crosses, and to the fact that the Church does not repeat the rite for amusement.

Moses anointed the altar and the vessels of the tabernacle. Solomon's Temple was dedicated with prayer, sacrifice and a glory that filled the house. The Church is not claiming that her chrism is that glory. She is claiming the right, given to a people of the Incarnation, to mark the things she uses for God.

Reflection

Oil disappears into stone. A week later a visitor cannot see where the bishop's thumb was, unless he knows to look for the cross.

A great deal of grace is like that. Baptism does not leave a mark a camera can find. Absolution does not change the face in the porch. The Eucharist looks like bread. The Church has always been willing to trust a gift that does not stay on the surface.

If you are waiting to see the result of a prayer before you believe it was heard, the walls are a quiet argument against you. They were anointed, the oil went in, and the house is still the house.

A Short Prayer

Christ, Anointed One, soak into what we have made, and stay. Amen.

Chapter 8

Twelve Crosses, Twelve Lights

†

Look up. In a dedicated church you may find twelve small crosses on the walls, or four, set where they can be seen, with a place for a candle beneath each one. They are not stations of the cross, and they are not builders' marks. They are dedication crosses. The bishop anointed the wall at each of them. In the older rite there were twelve, and twelve was the rule. The present Order keeps twelve, or four where that is more convenient. That is the current rule, not a guess.

Twelve is doing biblical work. Twelve tribes. Twelve apostles. The heavenly Jerusalem of the Apocalypse has twelve gates and twelve foundations. The Church is not saying that each cross is one apostle's portrait. She is saying that this local house belongs to the whole apostolic Church, not to a private chapel of taste. Four can stand for the same dedication when the walls are short. The number is a sign, not a spell.

On the day itself, a candle is lit at each cross. On the anniversary, the custom is to light them again. Many parishes forget. The brackets are still there, which is how you can often tell a dedicated church when the paperwork has gone missing. In the older law, the crosses were not to be removed, and if the documents were lost they helped to prove that the consecration had happened. They still do that work, more quietly.

Next Sunday, walk the walls before you sit down. If you find the crosses, you have found the day the house was given away. If you cannot find them, the church may have been blessed rather than dedicated, or the crosses may have been lost in a reordering. Both are worth asking about.

Reflection

We walk past dedication crosses without seeing them. Familiar things disappear. A person can receive Communion under one of them for forty years and never ask what it is.

That is not only a fact about architecture. It is a fact about grace. A marriage, a baptismal date, a confession that put a life back together: these can become invisible because they worked. The sign is still there. People simply stop noticing it.

One circuit of your own church would be enough to begin. Count the crosses. Then ask what else in the room you have stopped seeing.

A Short Prayer

Lord, open our eyes to the signs we have walked past. Amen.

Chapter 9

Incense, Cloth, Fire, and Mass

†

The anointing is not the end. In the present rite the bishop incenses the altar, and the church is incensed. Then the altar is clothed, the candles are lit, and the cross is set in place. Only then does the Mass begin. The order is the explanation. Everything before this has been preparing a table. The Eucharist is the reason for the altar.

Incense is the prayer of the house made visible, and it is also honour paid to the place where Christ will be offered. The cloth is the altar dressed for a meal. The lights are the festival beginning. None of these is the dedication by itself. The prayer of dedication has already been said, and the oil has already gone into the stone. The clothing is the house being made ready for its first sacrifice.

God has not been absent from the building site. He is everywhere. What changes is not His address. What changes is that this room is now set apart for the worship of the Church, and that, from this Mass on, Christ will be sacramentally present on this altar, and may be reserved in the tabernacle that is then brought into use. The older way of speaking, that God is moving in, is a picture. The truth underneath it is simpler. He was never far. He has been asked to be sought here.

A beautiful church without the Eucharist would still be incomplete. You can admire vaults in a dozen cities and never have been to Mass in them. The rite refuses that ending. It will not dedicate an altar and then leave it bare. The first thing the new altar is for is the Sacrifice.

Reflection

There is a difference between admiring a church and worshipping in it. Tourists do the first, and they are not wrong to look. The building was also made to be looked at. It was not made only for that.

If you have ever come away from a famous church with photographs and no prayer, you have seen the gap the rite is worried about. The cloth, the lights and the Mass are the Church saying that the room is for an action, not for a view.

The next time the altar is dressed and the candles are lit, you are seeing a small cousin of that morning. The house is being prepared again. The reason has not changed.

A Short Prayer

Lord, You are everywhere, and You have chosen to be sought here. Bring us to the altar, not only to the door. Amen.

Chapter 10

What Cannot Be Done Here Afterwards

†

Dedication has consequences, and they are easier to feel than to quote. A church is a sacred building designated for divine worship. The parish hall is not. The sanctuary is not the same thing as the nave, even though both are inside the dedicated walls. A meeting that belongs to the life of the parish can often be held in the church. A use that treats the altar as furniture cannot.

Canon Law puts it in one sentence, and then leaves the judgement to the bishop. In a sacred place, only those things are to be permitted which serve the exercise or promotion of worship, piety and religion. Anything out of harmony with the holiness of the place is forbidden. That is why a concert may be allowed and a party may not, and why the answer is sometimes a pastoral decision rather than a slogan. The principle is not hard. Do not make the house contradict the reason it was signed.

A church can also be let go. When it will no longer be used for divine worship, the bishop does not simply lock the door and call it deconsecrated, as if that were the technical word. The canonical phrase is that it is relegated to profane but not sordid use. In ordinary English: it may be used for an honest secular purpose, and it may not be used for anything vile. Where it can be done without harm, the altar is removed. The dedication crosses no longer mean what they meant. The people do.

St Peter's living stones are the part that cannot be boarded up. A parish may lose a building and remain a parish. It cannot lose Christ and remain itself. The walls were a sign, and a sign can be taken down. The worship they pointed to is celebrated somewhere else.

Reflection

A parish may one day lose a beloved church. Roofs fail. Towns empty. The bishop signs a decree, and a room that held weddings becomes a hall, or a silence.

What remains is not sentimental. The people who were baptised there are still baptised. The dead who were prayed for there are still prayed for. Christ is not stranded in a closed building. He is present wherever the Eucharist is celebrated, and He keeps the names the walls have forgotten.

If your church is still open, that is not a small mercy. Use it while you have it. The living stones are you.

A Short Prayer

Lord of the living stones, keep us when the walls cannot. Amen.

A Last Word

†

If these pages have done their work, the next time you are early for Mass you will look up. The crosses are easy to miss. They were not put there to be missed.

Keep the book if it helps. Give it to someone who has never asked why the walls were marked.

May the house you pray in be treated as a house that was given away. May you be one of the living stones it was built to hold.

Sources and Further Reading

†

Scripture: Genesis 28:10–22; 1 Kings 8; Psalm 24; Matthew 21:12–13; John 2:19–21; 1 Corinthians 3:16–17; 1 Peter 2:4–5; Revelation 6:9; Revelation 21. Eusebius, Church History 10, on the public dedication of churches after Constantine.

Order of the Dedication of a Church and an Altar: the diocesan bishop as minister; relics of martyrs or other saints beneath the altar, preserved if possible, and large enough to be recognised as parts of a body; anointing by pouring chrism on the middle of the altar and the four corners; twelve wall anointings, or four where more convenient; incensation, clothing and lighting of the altar, then the Mass. Ceremonial of Bishops, on the same rites.

Code of Canon Law, 1205 and 1214 on sacred places and churches, 1210 on uses in keeping with holiness, 1212 on loss of dedication, 1217 on dedication or blessing, and 1222 on relegation to profane but not sordid use. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1179–1186. The anniversary of the dedication is kept as a solemnity in that church.

The older Roman Pontifical, on the bishop knocking at the closed door, Gregorian water of water, salt, ash and wine, the Greek and Latin alphabets traced with the crozier in ashes on a cross in the nave, and the anointing of twelve wall crosses. The name Gregorian water is attested from the fourteenth century; the mixture itself is earlier. Catholic Encyclopedia, “Consecration,” on the alphabets, the crosses as evidence of consecration, and the older requirement of relics.

Keep a Light beneath the Cross

†

A church can look finished when the builders leave. It is not finished. Somebody laid the stone. Somebody prepared the altar. Somebody held a candle under a cross while the bishop anointed the wall above it. Somebody kept the record. Somebody, years later, has to tell a child why the crosses are there.

These pages are free to read. A gift is not payment for them. They are already yours. A booklet this short still takes a long time: the rite, the older Pontifical, the canons, Scripture, the checking, then the writing and the rewriting, the editing, the design, and the ordinary resources that make the hours possible. A gift through the Silent Homilies website is a real help with that. It is how the next one becomes possible.

I would be truly grateful. It is a practical help with time and resources, not a condition of reading. If you cannot give, nothing is owed.

Notice the dedication crosses in your own church. Ask when the building was dedicated, and light a candle on that day if you can. Or give this booklet to someone who has never looked up. www.silenthomilies.com

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