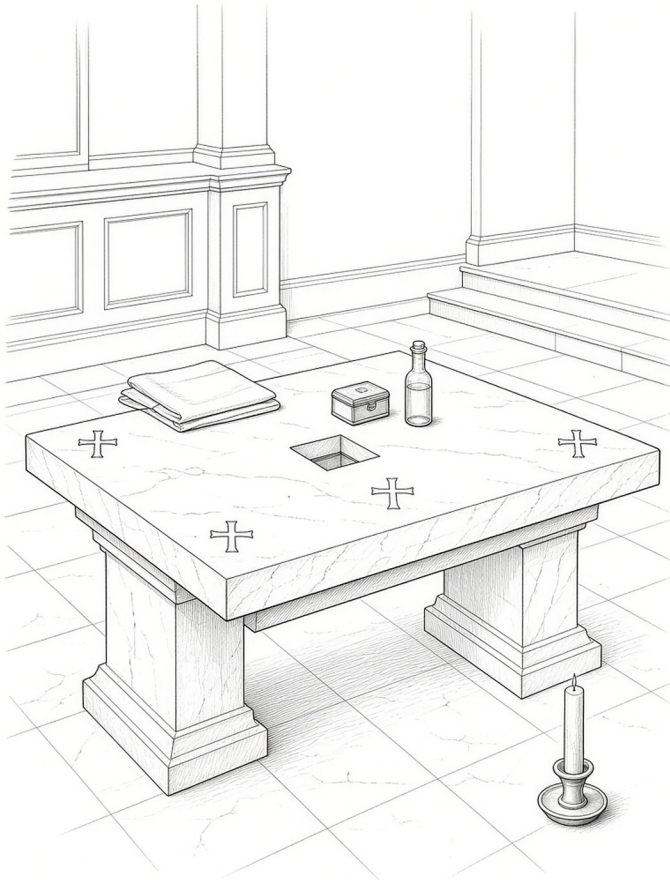




SILENT HOMILIES

The Stone They Anoint

*The altar, and why it is
never only a table*



Silent Homilies

Little Treasures



The Stone They Anoint

The altar, and why it is never only a table



Before You Begin



Most of us meet the altar as furniture. It stands in the middle, or at the far end, and we know without thinking that this is where the priest goes. Bread is set there. A book is set there. Candles burn at its corners. Then somebody calls it only a table, and somebody else treats it only as a shrine, and the Church's actual teaching sits between those two ideas, often unheard.

An altar is a table. That is true, and the Last Supper will not let us forget it. It is also a place of sacrifice. That is true as well, and Calvary will not let us forget it. The Catholic instinct has always been to refuse the choice. What stands in your parish is not a compromise between a meal and a death. It is the place where the same Lord who sat at a supper also gave His body.

This little book is not a campaign about which way a priest should face, and it is not a catalogue of marble. It walks through what the Church actually does to a piece of stone before anyone is allowed to say Mass on it: the small tomb cut in the surface, the relics that go into it or beneath it, the five crosses a bishop anoints with chrism, the cloths that dress the slab, the stripping on Holy Thursday, and the quiet law that still thinks it fitting to keep a saint under the table.

Read it if you have genuflected toward that stone for forty years and could not say why it is stone. Read it if you have only ever heard it called a table and suspected there was more. The more is not decoration. The more is a grave, an anointing, and a meal that does not cancel the grave.

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Chapter 1

Not Only a Table



In a dining room a table is honest. You put food on it. You sit. You talk. You clear it. The Christian supper began in rooms like that: an upper room in Jerusalem, then the houses of people whose names we still hear in Paul's letters. Bread was broken on wood that had also held ordinary meals. The Church has never been ashamed of that beginning. She still calls the altar a *mensa*, a table-top. She still speaks of the banquet.

St Paul uses both kinds of language. He speaks of the cup of blessing and the bread we break as a communion in the Blood and Body of Christ. He also speaks of the table of the Lord, and he warns the Corinthians not to treat that table as if it were only another meal. Hebrews says, "We have an altar." The sentence has a particular argument in its own chapter, but Catholic worship has long heard in it a simple claim: the Church is not without a place of offering.

What the Church will not do is stop at fellowship. The same night that gave us a table also gave us a body handed over. By morning there was a cross. The earliest Christians did not experience those as two religions. They experienced them as one hour stretched across a night. So when they needed a place to do again what He had done, they needed furniture that could tell both truths at once: a table for a meal, and a place of sacrifice from which people are still fed.

This is why arguments that treat "table" and "altar" as enemies always sound slightly thin in a Catholic ear. The Missal uses both words. The rite of dedication uses both. A parish that will only say "table" is trying to be warm and often ends up thin. A parish that will only say "altar" and never "table" is trying to be solemn and often ends up cold. The

stone in the middle of the church is supposed to be able to bear a loaf and a death without dropping either.

The next time you walk in, do not begin with the style of the wood or the direction of the chairs. Begin with this. Could a stranger tell, looking at that object, that something more than breakfast happens here? And could the same stranger tell that the people who gather are not only spectators of a sacrifice, but guests? Both questions belong. The Church has spent a long time trying to keep them both awake on the same slab.

Reflection

We often want Christianity to be comfortable fellowship or costly sacrifice. We are less willing to keep both in the same hour.

Catholic worship refuses the split. The Mass is a meal. It is also the making present of Christ's sacrifice. If you drop either half, Communion becomes thinner than the Church means it to be. A meal without Calvary becomes a religious supper. A sacrifice without a table becomes a spectacle we watch from a safe distance.

That is why the ordinary parish altar matters. It looks like furniture. It is asked to carry more than furniture can usually carry. Bread is set on it. A death is remembered on it. People are fed from it. The dead are, in a sense, gathered around it. None of that is a metaphor we invented to make stone interesting.

If you have ever felt that Mass is either too casual or too remote, you may be feeling the loss of one of these two truths. The remedy is not a new slogan. It is to look at the slab again and let both names stand: table and altar. The Church has been saying both for a long time. We are the ones who keep choosing only one.

A Short Prayer

Lord Jesus, keep us from treating the Mass as only a meal or only a sacrifice. It is both, because You gave us both. Amen.

Chapter 2

Wood, Tombs, and a Law That Wanted Stone



The first Christian altars were often wooden tables in houses. Archaeology and the old texts agree on that much. People met where they could. The Eucharist did not wait for quarries.

At the same time another instinct was already at work in Rome and in North Africa. Christians gathered at the tombs of the martyrs. They celebrated over bones. The Book of Revelation speaks of the souls of those who had been slain “under the altar.” The Church took that picture seriously enough to put real remains under real tables. This is not the same thing as saying that St John was writing a manual for later stonemasons. It is saying that Catholic practice grew from Scripture, not away from it.

By the late fourth and early fifth centuries the two instincts were being joined. A council at Carthage around the year 401 was already uneasy about altars that had no relics of martyrs. The worry was not superstition. It was communion. An altar without a witness under it could look like a private piece of furniture. An altar with a martyr under it said that this table belonged to the same company as the people who had died rather than deny the Name.

Stone arrived as the preferred material because stone lasts, and because a grave is not usually made of dining-room pine. Older law grew strict. A fixed altar should be of natural stone. The top, the mensa, should be a single slab. In it, or under it, relics should rest. Missionaries and chaplains who could not carry a whole tomb were given a small consecrated stone, sometimes no larger than a thick book, to set upon whatever table the road provided. The Mass, in that arrangement, was

understood to happen on the stone, even if the wood around it was only a stand.

Current law is gentler than the old manuals. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal still wants a fixed altar, dedicated, preferably of stone, standing free so that it can be walked around. It still calls the placing of relics “fittingly retained.” Wood is allowed. Other worthy, solid materials are allowed. Movable altars are allowed. A wooden altar is not a second-class altar if it is dedicated or blessed as the Church now permits. What is not allowed is the idea that any convenient surface will do because we have grown informal. Being informal is a tone of voice. An altar is still a claim the parish makes in public.

Reflection

Why did Christians eventually want stone? Not because Christ needs marble. Christ said Mass in a borrowed room.

They wanted stone because human beings forget. Wood rots. Tables are moved. A parish can change its mind about almost anything in a generation. A dedicated stone is a way of saying to the next people who enter the building: we intend Mass still to be celebrated here after we are dead.

That is a more demanding thought than taste. Permanence is not snobbery about materials. It is a promise. It tells the living that this act is not a meeting they invented this week.

Of course the Church still allows other worthy materials, and she is right to do so. Mission, poverty, and architecture all have their claims. The point is not to despise wood. The point is to notice what stone was trying to do. It was trying to outlast us.

Stone or wood, a dedicated altar is a real altar. The Church allows both. The more useful question is simpler. Does this table look as if the parish expects Mass still to be said here next century?

A Short Prayer

Lord, bless every humble table that has had to serve as an altar, and help us to honour the permanent stone when we are given one. Amen.

Chapter 3

The Little Tomb in the Table



If you have ever seen a sacristan lift a small square of stone from the middle of an old altar, you have seen the sepulchre. The word is not a flourish. It means tomb. Into that cavity the Church used to place relics: fragments of bone, sealed, named, and accompanied by a brief written testimony. Then the cavity was closed with a stone and cemented. From that moment the altar was both a grave and a table.

Present practice is related, but not identical. The General Instruction still says it is fitting to place relics of saints under the altar to be dedicated, and they need not be martyrs. The current rite of dedication normally sets them beneath the altar rather than in a small tomb cut into the mensa itself. Older altars often still have that visible joint in the surface. Newer ones may hide the relics lower down, or, if relics could not be had, the bishop may dedicate the table without them. The Mass on those altars is the Mass. The sacrament does not depend on a bone.

People who dislike relics dislike this more than almost anything else in the rite. It sounds to them like magic, or like a refusal to let the dead rest. The Church's answer has never been that bone makes bread become Body. The relic says something else. The people who already gave their bodies are allowed to keep watch where He gives His. The altar is not haunted. The saints are keeping company with the living.

Martyrs were preferred for centuries, and the preference still shows in the older language. What the Church has not done is treat the names as a lucky dip. A relic is supposed to be authentic enough for a bishop to take responsibility for it. The little paper that used to go into the sepulchre is not a spell. It is a label, as sober as a museum ticket and far more prayed

over.

The older arrangement is simply more talkative. It makes the communion of saints architectural. You do not have to feel anything about bones. You only have to notice that the Church declined to let the table stand alone.

Reflection

At Mass the Church on earth does not behave as if the dead have disappeared. That is one of the strangest and most consoling things about Catholic worship.

We name the living. We name the dead. We ask the saints to pray. And under many altars there is, quite literally, someone who has already died. The Eucharist is celebrated with the communion of saints, not as a metaphor painted on a banner, but as a fact built into the furniture.

There is something wonderfully Catholic about putting the dead under the table rather than outside the room. The modern world often hides death. The Church puts it in the middle, then covers it with a cloth and feeds the living from the same place.

This is not morbidity. It is communion. The people under the stone are not being used. They are being honoured as members of the same Body. If the thought makes you uneasy, stay with the unease for a moment. It may only be the shock of discovering that the Church really means what she says about the dead.

The next time you see an altar, remember that you may be standing nearer to another Christian than the empty church suggests.

A Short Prayer

Saints who rest near the altar, pray for us, and teach us not to be afraid of the dead who belong to Christ. Amen.

Chapter 4

Five Crosses and a Thumb of Oil



When a bishop dedicates an altar he does something most parishioners never see twice in a lifetime. After the relics have been placed, he anoints the mensa with sacred chrism. He marks it in five places: the centre and the four corners. Those five marks are often already cut into the stone as small incised crosses, waiting for the oil.

Catholics have long seen in those five crosses the Five Wounds of Christ. That reading is traditional and easy to remember. It is not, strictly speaking, the official explanation printed in the rite itself. The rite simply anoints the table in five places and claims it for the sacrifice of Christ. The wounds are a later, natural way of teaching what the oil is doing. Both things can be true at once, so long as we do not pretend the Missal printed a footnote it did not print.

Chrism is the same oil used at baptism, confirmation, and the ordination of a priest. To put it on an altar is to say that this object is being claimed the way a forehead is claimed. The bishop spreads the oil with his hand. In some celebrations he does it generously, so that the slab shines. Incense follows. Then the stone is wiped. Then the cloths go on. The order matters. First the grave. Then the anointing. Then the dressing. You do not put a feast on an unblessed rock and hope the room will understand.

The five crosses remain after the oil is gone. On a well-cut mensa you can still find them with a fingertip, even under linen, if you know where to press. A child who is told that the altar has been marked in five places will remember it longer than a paragraph about sacrifice. Later generations spoke of dressing and stripping the altar as if it were a

person, because the stone had been treated with the seriousness we usually keep for bodies.

Dedication is not reversible by mood. A church can be wrecked and the consecrated slab, if it survives, can still be an altar. A table that has never been dedicated can hold a Mass in necessity, because Christ is not imprisoned by marble. The rite exists for the ordinary case: a parish that will stand in the same place for a hundred years and needs the furniture itself to remember what the people forget.

Reflection

Catholicism does not believe that matter is spiritually irrelevant. That is one of the most misunderstood things about us.

Oil touches foreheads. Water touches bodies. Ash touches skin. Bread and wine are offered. A stone itself can be solemnly dedicated. People who want a purely mental religion find this embarrassing. The Incarnation makes it inevitable. If the Word became flesh, then flesh, oil, water and stone are allowed to carry meaning.

The anointing of an altar is not interior decoration. It is the Church doing to a table what she does to a Christian: claiming it publicly with chrism. After that, the object is no longer raw material. It has been set apart.

This should make us careful, and it should make us grateful. Careful, because we do not treat holy things as props. Grateful, because God is willing to use the stuff of the world rather than hovering above it.

If you ever watch a dedication, watch the bishop's hand. The gesture is almost domestic. It is also one of the most serious things the Church does to furniture. A thumb of oil, and the middle of the room is no longer ordinary.

A Short Prayer

Lord Jesus, You were anointed for us. Help us to treat holy oil, and the altar it marks, with reverence. Amen.

Chapter 5

The Cloths That Dress a Body



Once the stone has been anointed it is dressed. The present Missal asks for at least one white cloth. The older custom, still alive in many sacristies, used three. Under them, on the bare mensa, a cerecloth — a linen treated with wax — once protected the stone from damp and from the oil of the chrism. Over everything, at the moment of the gifts, goes the corporal, the small square whose name comes from *corpus*, body. The Body will rest on that square. The square is therefore not a napkin.

Watch a careful sacristan at five in the morning and you will see that none of this is theatre. Cloths are ironed. Edges are even. The corporal is folded in nine, so that any fragment is kept inside the linen and not shaken onto the floor. These are not fussy manners invented by people with too much time. They are the old refusal to let the Presence be treated as crumbs we cannot be bothered to chase.

The frontal, the antependium, that hangs down the face of some altars is another kind of clothing. It changes colour with the day. It can make a plain stone speak the season without a single banner. Parishes that stripped their frontals in the name of honesty sometimes discovered that a naked box is not automatically more honest. It is only more box-like. Clothing an altar is not vanity if the clothing follows the same logic as clothing a priest. The object is not appearing as raw material. It is appearing as something claimed.

On Holy Thursday night the clothing comes off. After the altar of repose has received the Blessed Sacrament, the main altar is stripped. The cloths go. The flowers go. The candles go. The stone is left looking like what it is when no one is dressing it. The shock of that bareness is part of

the liturgy. You are being shown the table without its feast, which is a way of being shown the night He was taken.

Reflection

Someone launders these cloths. Someone irons them. Someone unfolds the corporal properly and later folds it again so that nothing is lost. Their names may never appear in a parish history.

This is not glamorous Catholicism. It is the Church being maintained by people who notice. A stained corporal is a small failure of attention. A well-kept one is a small act of faith. Most of us never see the work because it happens before we arrive.

Holy Thursday makes the rest of the year visible. When the cloths come off, you see how much the stone depends on care. When they go back on Easter night, you see how much care depends on hope.

If you have ever dismissed altar linen as fuss, look again. The fuss is about fragments. The Church believes that what looks like a crumb may be the Lord. People who iron linen at dawn are taking that sentence seriously with their hands.

A parish can survive a plain altar. It does less well when nobody is willing to look after the plain things.

A Short Prayer

Lord Jesus, teach us to handle the altar linen with care, because Your Body is laid upon it. Amen.

Chapter 6

Cloth for the Road, and a Travelling Stone



The Latin West is not the only Christian memory of a portable holy table. In the Eastern Churches the antimimension — the word means “instead of the table” — is a decorated cloth with relics sewn into it, signed by the bishop. A Eucharist celebrated on that cloth is celebrated, in their understanding, on the bishop’s own authority and over the bones of the saints, even if the furniture under it is a kitchen table in a prison camp. Many a priest in the last century learned how little of a cathedral you actually need when the building itself is gone.

The Western cousin is the altar stone. Old manuals describe it with a surveyor’s calm: a slab of natural stone, large enough for host and chalice, with a sepulchre and relics, consecrated by a bishop. Army chaplains carried them. Missionaries carried them. A priest saying Mass in a barn set the stone on a crate, and suddenly the crate was not the altar. The stone was.

After the reforms of the twentieth century many places stopped blessing small stones and simply allowed a suitable table in necessity. The sacrament did not break. Something quieter changed: the old habit of thinking that holiness can travel in a piece of consecrated matter, the way a letter travels in an envelope. Relics in an antimimension and relics in an altar stone are the same instinct in two dialects. The dead go with the living. The bishop’s yes goes with the priest.

If your parish has an old stone still cemented into a wooden table, do not be embarrassed by the joint. That joint is a sentence from a poorer and more mobile Church. It says that the people who built this place expected the Mass to outlast the carpentry, and took trouble to give the

Mass a floor that would not rot when the legs did.

Reflection

A priest in a prison, a field, an army camp or a mission may lose the church building. What remains essential?

Not the baldachin. Not the marble step. Not the matching candlesticks. What remains is bread, wine, a priest, the words of the Church, and — in the older Western practice or in the East — some sign that this table is not the priest's private invention. A signed cloth. A small stone. A bishop's authority travelling with the Mass.

It is easy to romanticise all this. We should not. People who said Mass on crates were not trying to prove that architecture is unnecessary. They were trying to keep the Eucharist when architecture had been taken away.

That is why a permanent public altar is a privilege, not a museum piece. When you can have a dedicated stone in the middle of a parish church, you have something many Catholics in harder places could only fold into a bag.

If you ever see an old altar stone in a drawer, do not treat it as a curiosity. It is a reminder of how little the Church actually needs, and how much she will still try to carry.

A Short Prayer

Lord, go with priests who have to say Mass far from a church, and keep them faithful when almost everything else has been taken away. Amen.

Chapter 7

High Altars, Side Altars, and One Mass



Walk into a great medieval church and you will not find one table. You will find a high altar at the east, and then a scatter of smaller ones in aisles, transepts and chantry chapels. This was not greed for furniture. It was a theology of the dead and of the priest. Each altar could hold its own Mass. Each Mass could be offered for a founder, a guild, a soul. The side altar is the architectural form of “please remember.”

Old law even said that an altar should not ordinarily bear two Masses on the same day. The table was treated as if it had a limited hospitality. The rule has gone. The instinct under it is worth a moment. A sacred thing is not improved by being used harder. There is a kind of respect that looks like inefficiency. Modern parishes with one altar and six Sunday Masses are not disobedient. They are crowded. The crowding is a blessing and a strain. The old scatter of side altars was one answer to the strain.

The high altar collected the whole building toward one point. Even when other tables were busy, the church still had a heart. Later centuries put a tabernacle on that heart, then a throne, then a display that could make the table look like a sideboard for the monstrance. The twentieth century, in many places, pulled the altar forward and set the tabernacle apart, so that the table could be walked around and the reserved Sacrament could have its own quiet. Both arrangements have produced holiness. Both have produced muddle. The muddle is not an argument against trying.

What a visitor should notice is not which decade the furniture belongs to. It is whether the room still has a place that is obviously more

than a platform. Side altars that have become noticeboards have lost their job. A high altar used only as a flower shelf has lost its job. A free-standing table used with reverence has kept it. Style is not the sacrament. Neglect is the enemy of every style.

Reflection

Why does the Church keep saying names after people have died? Why have families asked for Masses, built chapels, paid for a side altar, and said to a priest, “Please remember him”?

Because love does not know what to do with absence, and Catholic faith gives it something to do. The Mass can be offered for the dead. That is not a transaction we invented to comfort ourselves. It is the Church believing that the sacrifice of Christ still reaches people we can no longer reach with our hands.

A side altar is that belief in stone. It is a place set apart so that a name can be spoken when the rest of the building is busy with the living. We may no longer have a chantry in every aisle. We still have the request. We still have the names.

If you have ever asked for a Mass to be said for someone, you were doing something very old. You were refusing to let death be the last word you were allowed to speak about them.

Look at a neglected side altar with that in mind. The dust may only be dust. It may also be a forgotten “please remember.”

A Short Prayer

Lord, keep our altars for the Mass, and do not let side chapels become only storage. Amen.

Chapter 8

The Altar Over a Grave



Some altars do not need a small sepulchre because the whole church is the sepulchre. St Peter's in Rome stands over a first-century grave the excavators reached in the twentieth century. The papal altar is not a symbol of Peter in the weak sense. It is a table set above bones the Church believes are his. The hollow space before and below such an altar is called a *confessio*, a witness-place. You walk down. You look toward the tomb. The Mass above you is happening over a man who was crucified upside down.

A canopy over an altar — the baldachin, or cibory, or ciborium in the architectural sense — is not a luxury invented for baroque taste. It is a way of saying that this table has a room of its own inside the larger room. Bernini's bronze at St Peter's is famous and loud. Older stone canopies in smaller churches do the same work with less noise. They keep the eye from sliding off the mensa into the general decoration.

Wawel Cathedral in Kraków holds, in the Romanesque crypt of St Leonard, an altar where a newly ordained Karol Wojtyła said his first three Masses on All Souls' Day in 1946. He chose the crypt on purpose, among the dead of his country. The hill above him was full of royal tombs. The table below was older and lower. A first Mass in such a place is a young priest admitting that the altar was never his invention. It was already a grave before he arrived with oil still on his hands.

You may not live near an apostle. You almost certainly live near an altar that has been dedicated over someone whose name is written on a scrap of parchment inside the stone, or remembered beneath it. The grandeur of Rome and the quiet of a village slab are the same idea at two

volumes. Someone who already died is keeping the table company. The roof above, if there is one, is only courtesy.

Reflection

A young priest may think his first Mass begins something. In a place like St Leonard's Crypt, it is just as true to say that he has arrived late.

The altar was there. The dead were there. The hill was already full of names. Wojtyła chose that on purpose. He did not begin on a blank stage. He began among people who had finished their work.

That is a good picture of priesthood, and of parish life more generally. We are almost always the newest people at an old table. The temptation is to treat the altar as our project. The healthier instinct is to notice that we have been allowed to stand where others stood.

If your own first memories of Mass are of a particular church, you already know this in a simpler way. Somebody set that table before you could walk. Somebody ironed the cloth. Somebody was buried from that same stone.

The priest is a late arrival. So are we. The altar is older than our opinions about it.

A Short Prayer

St Peter, and all the saints who rest near the altar, pray for us, and remind every priest that he arrives after many others. Amen.

Chapter 9

Which Way the Priest Stands



Few pieces of church furniture have been asked to settle a quarrel they did not start. After the Second Vatican Council many altars were brought forward so that the priest could face the people across the stone. The Missal allows this. It also still allows the older stance, in which priest and people face the same way — classically toward the east, toward the rising light that the Church has long read as a figure of the risen Lord. Both postures are Catholic. Neither is a dogma.

What got lost, in some places, was not a direction but a meaning. *Versus populum*, toward the people, can teach that the Mass is a meal we share. It can also suggest, if it is done carelessly, that the priest is a host at his own party. *Ad orientem*, toward the east, can teach that the whole room is turned toward God. It can also suggest, if it is done carelessly, that the people are spectators of a back. The stone does not start that quarrel. The way the priest stands at it does.

History is less neat than the pamphlets. Early Roman basilicas did not all face the same way. Popes have celebrated in both directions. Eastern Churches have generally kept a common orientation toward the apse. The question is older than the 1960s and will be older than our grandchildren. A parish that can only speak of this as victory or betrayal has already stopped looking at the altar and started looking at its opponents.

A quieter test is available every Sunday. Does the way the priest stands make the gifts more visible as gift, or more visible as performance? Does the room still know that the primary conversation is with the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit, and that the people are included in that

conversation, not invited to watch a religious programme? If those questions are alive, the compass point of the man's toes is a secondary mercy.

Reflection

Liturgical details matter. Anyone who says they do not has not watched a room change when a priest turns, or when an altar is moved.

What does not follow is that Catholics should turn those details into tribal badges. The altar is meant to gather the Church around Christ. It is a strange use of a table if arguments about how we stand around it stop us speaking to one another.

Both directions can be done well. Both can be done badly. Facing the people does not automatically make a Mass warmer. Facing east does not automatically make it holier. Reverence, clarity, and prayer do that work, whichever way the priest is turned.

If this question has become a test of whether someone is “one of us,” the altar has already been asked to do the wrong job. Let the Missal say what it actually permits. Then let the parish ask a more Catholic question: are we offering the sacrifice and sharing the meal, or are we rehearsing a dispute?

The stone will still be there when the dispute has tired itself out. That is one of its advantages.

A Short Prayer

Father, turn the whole church toward You, whichever way the priest is facing, and keep us from dividing over a direction. Amen.

Chapter 10

Candles, Cards, and What Is Not the Altar



The altar attracts objects the way a good table attracts elbows. Some of them belong. Some of them have wandered in. Candles belong. The rite wants light on the table of the Light. Flowers may belong, in measure, and should never turn the mensa into a meadow that leaves no room for bread. A crucifix belongs in the sight of the priest and the people. Whether it stands on the altar or near it is a matter of arrangement, not of faith.

The credence table is not the altar. It is the sideboard. Cruets wait there. The bowl for washing the priest's hands waits there. Confusing the two is how a sanctuary becomes a cluttered kitchen. The tabernacle is not the altar either, though for centuries it often sat on the high altar and still does in many churches. Reservation is its own mystery: the Lord remaining. The altar's own mystery is the Lord being offered now. Both are Eucharistic. They are not the same sentence.

Altar cards — those three printed pages that once stood on the mensa to help the priest through the Latin he was not to invent — have mostly gone. What they witnessed to is not gone. The words are not the priest's. He may not rearrange the supper because he has a better idea. A card, a missal, a screen, a book on a stand: each is a way of admitting that the table already has a script.

If your sanctuary looks busy, the question is not whether beauty is allowed. Beauty is allowed. The question is whether a stranger could still find the stone. When the eye cannot tell the altar from the arrangements, the arrangements have won. The old discipline was simple to the point of severity: nothing on the mensa except what the Mass required at that

moment. Severity is not the only path. Clarity still matters.

Reflection

This is not a reflection about metaphorical clutter in the soul. It is about actual objects on an actual table.

Catholics sometimes place so many good things around the altar that the altar disappears. Flowers, cards, microphones, extra candles, a forest of folders, a statue that would be better on its own pedestal. Each thing may have a reason. Together they can hide the one thing the room is for.

Even good things must know when to stand aside. That is a Catholic lesson as old as the sanctuary. The corporal needs a clear space. The chalice needs a clear space. The eye needs a clear space. Charity to the stranger in the back row includes not making him hunt for the stone.

If you have charge of a sanctuary, try the severe test once. Remove everything the rite does not ask for at that moment. See whether the altar becomes more itself. You may put some things back. You will put them back more carefully.

The middle of the room should remain the middle of the room.

A Short Prayer

Lord, let the candles and flowers serve the altar, and keep the stone itself visible. Amen.

Chapter 11

When the Stone Is Taken Away



English parish churches still show the scars. In the sixteenth century altars were pulled down and tables were set up, sometimes in the middle of the nave, sometimes against a wall, according to the politics of the year. The fight was not only about furniture. It was about whether the Mass was a sacrifice or only a reminder of one. People died on both sides of that sentence. A visitor who traces a pale rectangle on an old east wall is tracing an argument that cost blood.

The Church of England later recovered much of what had been smashed. The Oxford Movement put stones back where tables had been. Catholic missions in the same country said Mass on kitchen tables and on portable stones and, in penal years, on any surface that would hold a book and a cup while a lookout watched the lane. The sacrament did not require marble. The people required courage. When marble returned, it was not because God had been waiting for a quarry. It was because a free Church likes her claims to be built so they cannot be folded away overnight.

In the twentieth century other regimes took other tables. Mass in barracks, Mass in forests, Mass on an overturned canoe with two paddles lashed as a cross: that last is a Polish memory of the priest his students called Wujek. The canoe was not dedicated. The Mass was the Mass. Stories like that do not abolish the rite of anointing. They explain why the rite exists. When you can have a stone, you anoint it, so that the next generation will not have to keep inventing a table at dawn.

If your parish altar looks too permanent to be interesting, that is part of its job. Permanence is a kind of teaching. It says we intend to do this

here until we are ourselves among the dead. A community that can only celebrate on a trestle it puts away with the chairs has not become more apostolic. It has only become easier to evict.

Reflection

A kitchen table under danger does not prove that altars do not matter. It may prove the opposite.

Catholics who celebrated secretly were not choosing informality. They were forbidden to pray openly. We should not confuse their necessity with our taste. If they could have kept a public, anointed stone, many of them would have done so at once, and some of them died for the chance.

That should make a safe parish humble. The permanence of our altar is a privilege. It means we are allowed to make a claim in the middle of the room and leave it there overnight.

It should also make us careful not to treat the emergency as the ideal. The Church permits Mass in necessity on a suitable table because Christ is not imprisoned by marble. She still builds and anoints altars because a free people ought to have a public place of sacrifice.

If your stone looks ordinary, good. Ordinary public worship is one of the things persecuted Catholics were not allowed. Notice it. Keep it. Do not apologise for it.

A Short Prayer

Lord Jesus, bless every hidden Mass said under danger, and help us not to take a public altar for granted. Amen.

Chapter 12

Living as If the Middle of the Room Were True



You cannot consecrate the altar in your parish. That work is a bishop's. You can decide whether you will treat the stone as the middle of the room. Genuflection, if the Sacrament is present, is one language. A slower walk past the mensa even when the tabernacle is elsewhere is another. Teaching a child not to pile hymn books on the cloth is a third. None of these gestures save you. All of them admit that the furniture is not only furniture.

If you serve at Mass, learn the difference between the altar and everything else. Do not use the mensa as a desk. Do not rest a free hand on it as if it were a café counter. Set things down only when the rite asks. These are small refusals. They train the body in a doctrine the tongue can recite without noticing.

If you sit in the nave, look toward the five places a bishop once touched, even if linen now hides them. Remember that someone may be under there, or that the Church wished someone were. Remember that oil once made the slab shine. Remember that on one night of the year the cloths will come off and you will see how poor a stone is without a feast. Then, when the cloths go back, you will know what you are looking at.

The altar will still be there on the Monday morning when no one is singing. That is its most Catholic hour. A table that only exists when the community feels gathered is a table the community owns. A stone that waits in an empty church is a stone that has a claim on the community. We do not put God on our furniture. We discover that He has already claimed a piece of our floor.

Reflection

What would change if next Sunday we remembered that this ordinary object in front of us had once been solemnly anointed and set apart?

Not a new feeling, necessarily. Perhaps only a slower step. A child told not to use the cloth as a shelf. A server who stops treating the mensa as a convenient ledge. A parishioner who looks for the middle of the room and finds it.

Reverence sometimes begins simply by noticing again. The altar becomes invisible because it is always there. Familiarity is not the same as understanding. Most of us have looked at the stone for years without asking why it is stone, why it is clothed, why it has those five marks, why someone may be under it.

You do not need a dedication ceremony this week. You need only to enter as if the middle of the room were true. Because it is. The bishop's oil has dried. The names under the slab, if they are there, are still there. The meal and the sacrifice will be offered again on the same surface. Then go home. The point of noticing the altar is not to live in church. It is to know where the Church has put the centre, so that the rest of the week is not centre-less.

A Short Prayer

Lord, this altar is Yours. Keep us from treating it as ours, in the empty church and in the crowded one. Amen.

A Last Word



A wooden table in a house. A grave in a catacomb. A law that wanted stone. A small tomb cut in the mensa. Five crosses waiting for a bishop's thumb. Cloths that dress and, one night a year, come off. A travelling slab the size of a book. A canopy over an apostle. A pale scar on an English wall where the table was taken away.

That is enough of the altar for one sitting. The rest is in the rite of dedication, which most of us will see only once, and in the quiet competence of the people who iron the linen before we arrive.

If these pages have done their work, you will walk into church next Sunday, look at the ordinary stone in the middle, and realise that you have looked at it for years without quite seeing what it was carrying.

May every parish keep a stone that can bear both a loaf and a death. May the names under the slab not be forgotten. May the five marks stay sharp under the cloth. And may we walk past the middle of the room as if it were true, because it is.

St Peter, pray for us. Holy martyrs under the altar, pray for us. St Joseph, keeper of the house, pray for us.

Sources and Further Reading



Holy Scripture, especially Genesis 22; Exodus 20:24–26 and 27; Psalm 43:4; Malachi 1; the Last Supper narratives in Matthew 26, Mark 14 and Luke 22; 1 Corinthians 10:16–21 and 11:23–29; Hebrews 13:10; Revelation 6:9 and 8:3–4. Biblical wording in this booklet follows the Revised Standard Version, Second Catholic Edition, or is closely paraphrased.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1182, 1383 and 1350 on the altar; 1362–1372 on the sacrificial character of the Eucharist; 1348–1355 on the structure of the Mass; 1373–1381 on the Real Presence.

General Instruction of the Roman Missal, 296–308, especially 301 on the material of the altar, 302 on relics, and 303–305 on the covering and adornment of the altar. Code of Canon Law, canons 1235–1239 on the altar.

The Order of the Dedication of a Church and an Altar, particularly the rite of dedicating an altar, the anointing of the mensa in five places, the placing of relics, and the clothing of the altar. The five-wounds reading of the five crosses is traditional Catholic piety, not an official sentence of the rite itself.

On relics and older sepulchres, distinguish current practice (relics fittingly placed beneath a newly dedicated altar; saints, not only martyrs) from the older mensa-sepulchre. On Carthage around 401 and early unease about altars without martyr-relics, see the late antique African councils as reported in standard collections.

On the antimension, Eastern liturgical sources. On portable altar stones, the older Roman liturgical books and manuals for chaplains. On St Peter's, the twentieth-century excavations under the confessio. On Karol Wojtyła's first Masses, 2 November 1946, in St Leonard's Crypt at Wawel. On English altars in the sixteenth century, the documentary history of the Reformation settlement and the later recovery of stone altars.

One last thing, personally



You may have read this Little Treasure in an evening. It took much longer to write. Sometimes one sentence has to be checked against several sources before I am willing to leave it on the page. An attractive Catholic story is no use to anyone if it is not true.

I want these booklets to remain free to read. I mean that. I want someone who cannot give anything to be able to finish the last page without embarrassment. But they are not free to make. Each one takes research, books, the slow work of checking Scripture and Catholic teaching, distinguishing old custom from present law, writing, rewriting, design, a website, and time.

If this book has given you something worth keeping, and you would like to help me continue, I would be truly grateful. A gift is not payment for what you have just read. That has already been given freely. It simply helps me find the hours and the sources for the next Little Treasure.

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Thank you for reading. And thank you for helping these Little Treasures continue, in whatever way you can.

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