

What Do They Mean?

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The High Altar at Holy Cross

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I. THE ALTAR

THE principal object in a church is the altar. In fact, the main reason for having a church building is to protect the altar and provide means for using it properly.

If you will look at the picture of the high altar at Holy Cross, you will see, first of all, that there is a crucifix on it. On some altars a cross is used. Whether there is a representation of our Lord on the cross or not, it serves to remind us of our Lord and His redeeming work of love. But the altar should attract our attention more than the cross or crucifix or reredos or altar picture.

On this altar at Holy Cross there are six candlesticks. The number is not symbolical. On other altars you will see two candlesticks, or perhaps four. Most ceremonial articles had a practical use in the beginning, and then, after the practical use ceased, they were given a symbolical one. The practical use of candles and

lamps in the early Church was to give light, since often the early Christians worshipped in catacombs. Nowadays we usually do not need candles for light, so they have been given a symbolical meaning. The places where we burn lights in the church are usually those where heaven touches the darkness of our lives. Generally speaking, lights express our joy in worship, and remind us of Christ, the Light of the world. Usually two lights burn at a simple celebration of the Holy Eucharist, while six are often used at a sung service.

Other candles may be carried in procession and candles and lamps may be used at shrines. Wherever used, the meaning is the same,—to remind us that Christ is the light that enlightens every soul that comes into the world. In some places, opportunity is given the people of lighting candles (called “votive” lights) before the Blessed Sacrament, statues, or shrines. The candle represents our prayer, and will burn for some hours after we have left the church and gone about our work.

On the front of this altar is a vestment called a “frontal.” The one in the picture is green and

is used in Trinity-tide and on Sundays after the Octave of the Epiphany. Green is the color of growing things in nature: it is the color of hope. Other colors are used at other seasons: white for Christmas, Easter, and many great feasts; red for Whitsunday and on feasts of the martyrs of the Church (such as St. Peter and St. Paul) and purple or violet on penitential days, such as days in Advent and Lent; black for All Souls’ Day, and for services for the Dead. But black is never used for the color of the frontal and veil on an altar where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved; in this case the proper color for the veil and frontal would be purple. The priest’s vestments in services for the Departed are always black.

In the middle of this altar and before the crucifix, you will see a tent-like object. This is called a “tabernacle” and is used to enshrine the Blessed Sacrament. A white light burns before the altar where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved. Some churches use a red light. But since lamps are sometimes used as signs of devotion before other altars or shrines, the real sign of the reserved Sacrament is the veil over the tab-

ernacle. This veil should cover the entire tabernacle and is of the color of the day: white or red or green or purple.

The first reason for reserving the Blessed Sacrament is for the benefit of the absent. Perhaps someone is ill and cannot come to the service. In time of sickness or death, the priest can carry Holy Communion from the tabernacle to the home of the communicant at any hour of the day or night. There are classes of people who can rarely get to church at service time. Among these are airmen, soldiers, nurses, orderlies, policemen, printers, trainmen, newsboys. These people may come to a church at any time and receive Holy Communion from the tabernacle, provided they are properly prepared.

And of course wherever our Lord is present He should be adored. The services called Adoration and Benediction are times during which we turn our thoughts directly to our Lord and worship Him present in the Blessed Sacrament.

When we approach an altar where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved, a genuflection is made; that is, we bend our right knee until it touches the floor. If the Blessed Sacrament is not

on the altar, we salute the altar with a simple bow of the head. We also genuflect at other times, to emphasize our devotion. Such other occasions are at the words in the Creed "and was incarnate . . . and was made Man"; at the mention of our Lord's Incarnation in the Last Gospel where it says, "And the Word was made flesh"; at the words, "fell down and worshipped Him," in the gospel for Epiphany; at the mention of our Lord's death in the Holy Week Gospels where it says, "He gave up the Ghost," and on other similar occasions.

During Mass or other services or at other times the sign of the cross is sometimes made. Made at the end of the Creed, for example, it means, "This is *my* faith." It is a way of pointing to oneself and showing our personal belief. The cross is the sign or symbol of our Christian faith and as such it is used when we receive Holy Communion; at the beginning and ending of our prayers; at the ending of the Creed and Gloria in excelsis; at grace before meals; when we are blessed; and on similar devotional occasions when we wish to consecrate our acts. For example it is made three times with the thumb on

the forehead, lips, and heart at the announcement of the Gospel for the day, to consecrate the mind, heart, and lips to Christ.

On Sundays, before Mass, there is used, in some churches, holy water. First the altar, then the people are sprinkled with holy water as a symbol of purification. The water that is left over from this service is placed in stoups at the doors of the church. This holy water reminds us of the waters of our Baptism; that through our Baptism we were cleansed and incorporated into the Church, the mystical Body of Christ. We have an expression, "Blood is thicker than water." But the waters of our Baptism are thicker than blood, for they bind together in a spiritual union, now and forever, all the baptized. To remind ourselves of our cleansing and of our union with all Christians, it is customary, in some places, to make the sign of the cross with holy water on entering and leaving a church.

Incense is sometimes used. Incense was one of the gifts the Wise Men offered. In Revelation viii, 4, incense is associated with the prayers of the saints. It symbolizes prayer and worship. In

the beginning incense, like candles and holy water and vestments, had a practical use. But when the practical use ceased, it was given a symbolic meaning. So today the Blessed Sacrament is sometimes censed as a symbol of our adoration. The altar is censed because it is the throne of God and as such deserves reverence. Priests and people are censed because, being members of the Body of Christ, they are worthy of honor, not because of anything they are in themselves but because they are tabernacles of the Holy Spirit and belong to God.

Sometimes a bell is used in services to emphasize something that is important. The more important places are at the Sanctus; at the consecration of the bread and wine to be the Body and Blood of Christ; and when a blessing is given with the Holy Sacrament. Our attention often wanders and the bell says to us, "Pay attention to God."

II. THE VESTMENTS

VARIOUS vestments are used in the worship of God, especially at the Holy Eucharist. In the beginning these had a practical use. Now

they have a ceremonial use. The Eucharistic vestments are the amice, alb, cincture, maniple, stole and chasuble. The chasuble, maniple and stole are properly made of silk or other rich material and their color is the same as that of the altar hangings for the season. These vestments are ornamented in certain traditional ways. The chasuble usually has upon the back a large cross, whose arms, in the old English use, run obliquely. A vestment called a cope is worn at solemn services when it would not be correct to use Mass vestments.

Books concerning ceremonial give interesting explanations of the symbolism of the various vestments. For example, the chasuble is said to represent the seamless robe worn by our Lord, which is a type of the unity of the Holy Catholic Church; the stole reminds us of the yoke of Christ; the alb signifies the spotless purity which should characterize the priest who wears it; the amice, "the helmet of salvation." (See Ephesians 6:17.) But perhaps it is enough to say that the vestments are the traditional clothing of a priest while celebrating the mysteries of the Altar. They are garments which are assumed for a

special work, much in the same way that men wear "dress" clothes at a special social or fraternal meeting, or workmen use special clothes. They come down to us from the very earliest times, and are found, with variations, in all parts of the Church.

III. OTHER SYMBOLS

AT Christmas time evergreens are hung in churches and a crib, or representation of our Lord's birth in Bethlehem, is prepared. At Epiphany it is customary to add to the group in the crib the figures of the three Kings. Sometimes the shepherds remain, sometimes are removed. It is purely a matter of local custom. The Christmas decorations should be removed after the Octave of the Epiphany.

At the feast of the Purification, sometimes called Candlemas, the candles to be used during the year in church are blessed; and some are lighted and carried in procession. They remind us that Christ is the Light that lightens the Gentiles and every man that is born into the world.

On Ash Wednesday, ashes made from burning the palms of the previous Palm Sunday may be

blessed. The people kneel at the Communion rail, and a sign of the cross is made on their foreheads with these ashes while the priest says, "Remember, O man, that dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return."

In Lent the Stations of the Cross may be said on Fridays or other days, to remind us of the Passion of our Lord. They represent fourteen events on the way of sorrows from Pilate's court to Calvary. In making this devotion the people pass from station to station, pausing at each one to meditate and pray.

On Palm Sunday palms are blessed and distributed, in memory of the first procession of palms when our Lord rode into Jerusalem.

During Passiontide all crosses, crucifixes, and devotional statues and pictures are veiled in purple. This is done to remind us of the Passion. During Passiontide we should meditate on the meaning of the cross and to emphasize this, the cross is hidden under a purple veil. The veils on the crucifixes and crosses are usually removed on Good Friday, those on the pictures and statues on Holy Saturday.

During Eastertide a large candle, called the

Paschal candle, burns on the Gospel side of the altar to remind us of our Lord's Resurrection. It is extinguished after the Gospel on Ascension Day.

It is by the use of such dignified symbols as have been described that the sincere Christian offers all of himself, body and soul, to God. Most people like some kind of ceremonial, whether it is that of their church, their lodge, their fraternity, or their family. Some people say that they prefer not to use externals to help their devotion, but employ pictures in the minds. Now, whether the pictures are inside us or outside us, they are symbols. It is hard to see how anyone who recognizes that he is both material and spiritual, can get along without the use of some kind of symbolism, ritual, or ceremonial. The question then arises: "What kind of symbolism?" The most reasonable answer is, "That kind of symbolism which has been used for centuries by the Church and so has stood the test of the ages."