

THE ALTAR- Part 2

In the beginning, Christian communities gathered in homes to celebrate this ritual meal. As their numbers grew, these communities adapted homes and eventually built spaces specifically for worship. In these spaces, the shape of the table evolved from a dining room table for daily meals to one more suited to the ritual meal. It became taller and more square. Though it frequently retained stone and more and more became fixed within the building.

As greater numbers of Christians gathered in larger and larger spaces, altars also became associated with the burial places of saints and were frequently built above their remains in large basilicas. Eventually elongated altars moved further from the gathered assembly until they were set in the rear of the sanctuary, often elevated, and with a significant backdrop. Sometimes canopy of cloth or wood extended over the altar to further define the space. Tabernacles were often placed in the center of these altars, and the liturgy was conducted principally from the altar.

In the recent past, in a recovery of an early understanding of the Eucharist, altars have moved closer to the assembly and are to be designed to express both the meal and sacrificial dimensions of the Eucharist. Only the bread and the wine and the Missal are ordinarily placed on it. New churches are to have a single freestanding altar placed in such a way that everyone gathered can have an unobstructed view. The proportions of the altar should be in harmony with the architecture of the space and designed to compliment the other significant furnishings, especially the ambo- the Table of the Word and the presidential chair, where the priest sits.

Many of the parables of Jesus revolved around food and feasts. And so, we are not surprised to hear the kingdom of heaven described as a lavish banquet. Every Sunday, we are called to the table of the Lord to share in this feast, joining with countless generations of believers who have stood around the altar to keep Christ's command, "Do this in memory of me."

Excerpts from Built On Living Stones: "At the Eucharist, the liturgical assembly celebrates the ritual sacrificial meal that recalls and makes present Christ's life, death, and resurrection, proclaiming 'the death of the Lord until he come.'" The altar is "the center of thanksgiving that the Eucharist accomplishes" and the point around which the other rites are in some manner arrayed." (GIRM 269) The Church teaches "the altar is Christ." (RCDA, ch 4, no. 4)