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Redeemably Awful: The Christian Altar

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In last month's article, I started this series on the current state of the Liturgy of the Eucharist as celebrated in many of our parishes. My title for the series is "Redeemably Awful" and I am proposing an uncomfortable examination of conscience as we mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Roman Missal as promulgated by Pope Paul VI.

This month I continue the reflection by looking at the place of the altar in the church building.¹ Everybody knows that the altar is important, but it often doesn't receive the importance it needs. At the start I must admit that things today are better than they were once upon a time. In the late sixth century, St Columbanus, had a problem with a certain lack of respect in the manner that his monks treated the altar of his monastic church and had to provide a specific penance in his *Communal Rule* to deal with those monks who spat at the altar.²

But today the problem we face is one of neglect more than disrespect. Many of our churches were built before Vatican II and after the Council these needed to be reordered for the new liturgy. However Mark Searle's reflections on the issues facing a typical parish in the United States from the early 1980's still ring true for many Irish churches:

"It is extraordinarily difficult to bring the tumultuous history of liturgical renewal in the American parish over the last twenty years into any kind of satisfactory focus. Perhaps the best way

- 1 As this is a popular article, I will only give footnotes for the exact quotations that I use. For a more academic treatment, I refer readers to two earlier publications, "Plenty Good Room: The Liturgical Need for Altars of Adequate Size." *San Vitores Theological Review* 1 (2014): 42-51 and *Liturgical Orientation: The Position of the President at the Eucharist*. Joint Liturgical Studies 83 (Norwich: Alcuin Club, 2017).
- 2 "If any spits and touches the altar, [let him pray as penance] twenty-four psalms" *Regula Coenobialis* 13 in in G. S. M. Walker, *Sancti Columbani Opera*. *Scriptores Latini Hiberniae* Vol. 2 (Dublin: School of Celtic Studies, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1957), 163.

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of grasping what happened would be to go into almost any parish church in the land, built before the middle or late sixties, sit about halfway back and allow the environment to tell its own story. Chances are that the structure itself remains essentially what it was. The old altar against the back wall is probably still in place, but stripped of its mass cards, its candles, and maybe its tabernacle ... The altar rails may still be in place, but the gates have been removed and the starched linens which used to adorn them have long since been folded up and abandoned to some inaccessible sacristy cupboard ... The sanctuary, in particular, has suffered. The once intimidating sweep of steps up to the high altar is now broken with a second portable counterpart, invariably looking makeshift and out of place. The pulpit, if it remains, goes largely unused: a spindly lectern, with a colored cloth and a microphone attached, has replaced it. Chairs of undetermined vintage, rescued from the monsignor's hallway, take up the remaining space. One has the sense that in half an hour all that has come about in the space of twenty years could be cleared away and the old order restored. It has not died, it has not even faded away. It merely sleeps".³

We don't know too much about the table that Jesus used for the last supper. Later Christian stories mention St. Luke painting different icons of the Virgin Mary on the wood of that table. For the first three centuries of her existence, the Christian Church wasn't in a position to build church buildings and we know very little about the altar during this time. It is probable that the Eucharist was celebrated on portable tables that could be moved away when they weren't needed. But in the Patristic era, when the first purpose built Christian churches had been built, the altar was considered to be the primary symbol of the presence of Christ. St Ambrose is of the opinion that "Christ's altar [is] the image of Christ's body"⁴ The altar was considered to be the place where Christians went to pray. In a sense it was almost like what the Tabernacle would become in later centuries, the place they considered closest to God. We can see this in St Monica's dying instruction to her sons, "this only thing I ask of you: that you should remember me at the altar of the Lord wherever you may be."⁵ This was before St Augustine had any thought of being ordained, she is simply asking them to pray for her when they are near the altar.

3 Mark Searle, "Reflections on Liturgical Reform," in *Worship* 56 (1982), 411-412.

4 *On the Sacraments*. Catechesis Five 2.7 in Lawrence J. Johnson, ed. and trans., *Worship in the Early Church: An Anthology of Historical Sources* (Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN, A Pueblo Book, 2009), 2.60.

5 *Confessions* 9.11 in F. J. Sheed, trans., *Augustine: Confessions*. 2nd ed. (Hackett, Indianapolis, IN, 2006), 180.

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Through the centuries the *holiness* of the altar was emphasized more and more. As this appreciation grew, the altar began to become more distant from the people. It was protected by baldacchinos and curtains, altar rails and rood screens. Yet throughout the centuries the altar remained at the heart of Christian devotion. People always desired to be close to the altar and throughout the Middle Ages devotion was often centred on it and this desire to see the liturgical action at the altar remained. The side altars often providing an access that was denied to the laity who found themselves further and further from the high altar. During the Counter Reformation, the Jesuits introduced a new form of church layout that gave a visual prominence to the altar, doing away with the medieval choir that distanced the altar from the people. There was a radical change to the manner Mass was celebrated during the Baroque period which promoted a new church layout where everybody could *see* the action at the altar.

THE SIZE OF THE ALTAR

Today we need to ask an uncomfortable question about our own altars; are they fit for purpose? All churches now have free-standing altars that allow for *versus populum* (facing the people). But on a basic level we need to see if all of our altars are made of worthy materials, well decorated and not cluttered. It can be interesting to compare the quality of the old high altar to the newer current altar in our older churches. But perhaps more importantly the basic question is whether the altar is big enough to properly carry out its principal function of holding enough bread and wine for the Eucharistic celebration.

One of the tragedies of Christian spirituality was that, for centuries, most Catholics only received Communion very rarely. Indeed from the fourth century till Pope St. Pius X in the early twentieth, many Catholics felt unworthy to receive Communion. The Fourth Lateran Council (1205) had to mandate that Catholics had to receive Communion at least once a year (the so-called “Easter duty”). But for centuries in most Masses only the priest received Communion. So the altar didn’t have to be very big. At the same time the custom also developed of administering Communion to the “people” at a different time from when the priest received, thus *separating* the Communion of the faithful from the actual celebration of the Eucharist. Even though people received Communion very rarely, those rare occasions often took places on major feasts or on pilgrimages. So, for logistical reasons, Communion was usually administered from the tabernacle and *not* the altar. Yet this is a liturgical abuse, that has been condemned

by the Church for centuries. Pope Benedict XIV's 1742 *Certiores effecti* was dedicated to fighting this abuse.⁶ This condemnation is repeated in Pope Pius XII *Mediator Dei* (1947) and Vatican II's *Sacrosanctum Concilium* as well as the current edition of the *General Instruction on the Roman Missal*. Yet in most parishes it is still the regular practice to administer Communion from the tabernacle (while the tabernacle should only be used for the *Viaticum*, Communion of the sick and adoration).

In our days Communion is frequent. In Ireland Communion from the Eucharistic Cup is not that common, but every Church should be able to accommodate it (and hopefully the practice will become more widespread). Where this is the practice, it is normal to have a ratio of two ministers of the cup for every minister distributing the Eucharistic Bread. This means that the altar needs to be capable of elegantly holding a presidential cup and plate, as well as less prominent ministerial cups and plates so that the entire capacity of the church can receive Communion under both kinds, with everything consecrated at the Mass they are attending. Additionally the altar must hold the candles and the missal, as well as the functional necessities such as a microphone.

In the prayer of Dedication of a new altar, the *Rite of Dedication of a Church and Altar* has a beautiful prayer of dedication of an altar. It would do us no harm to ask if the altars in our churches do justice to it:

Make this altar a sign of Christ
from whose pierced side flowed blood and water,
which ushered in the sacraments of the Church.

Make it a table of joy,
where the friends of Christ may hasten
to cast upon you their burdens and cares
and take up their journey restored.

Make it a place of communion and peace,
so that those who share the body and blood of your Son
may be filled with his Spirit and grow in your life of love.

Make it a source of unity and friendship,
where your people may gather as one
to share your spirit of mutual love.

6 I have translated the encyclical and commented on it in "Partakers of the Same Sacrifice." *Antiphon* 16:2 (2012): 130-143.

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Make it the center of our praise and thanksgiving
until we arrive at the eternal tabernacle,
where, together with Christ, high priest and living altar,
we will offer you an everlasting sacrifice of praise.

In next month's issue I will reflect on the term 'active participation' and its implications for Christian worship in our parishes.

Future Challenges. Over the course of the last century, global average life expectancy has more than doubled, and is now nearing seventy years. Over many parts of the developed world, a child born today can expect to live for over eighty years. But the paradox is that this radical improvement in the human condition has occurred as global environmental degradation has plumbed new depths. A spectrum of environmental drivers, headed by climate change, but including air and water pollution, freshwater scarcity, land and ocean degradation and major losses of biodiversity, now threatens the very existence of humankind in anything like contemporary numbers in the long, and possibly medium, term. The realisation that our present well-being is achieved by mortgaging the options for future generations is now a stark reality, part of the defining characteristics of what has now become known as the Anthropocene Epoch.

– JOHN SWEENEY, in *Modern Culture and Well-Being*, ed. Catherine Conlon (Dublin: Veritas) p. 96