

The Mass in Slow Motion

The Altar is Reverenced

This is a series on the Mass explaining the meaning and history of what we do each Sunday. This series of flyers is an attempt to add insight and understanding to our celebration of the Sacred Liturgy. You are also invited to learn more by attending Sunday School classes for adults which take place in the school cafeteria each Sunday from 9:45 a.m. to 10:45 a.m.

This series will follow the Mass in order.

As the Entrance procession draws to its close something rather unusual happens! Upon entering the sanctuary, (the part of the Church where the Altar and Tabernacle are located) the priest and deacon enter the sanctuary and kiss the altar as a sign of reverence and veneration. Many of us who go to Mass all the time may hardly notice this gesture. But to someone observing Mass for the first time this gesture may seem quite unusual and raise questions. Why kiss an altar? Where did this gesture come from and what does it mean?

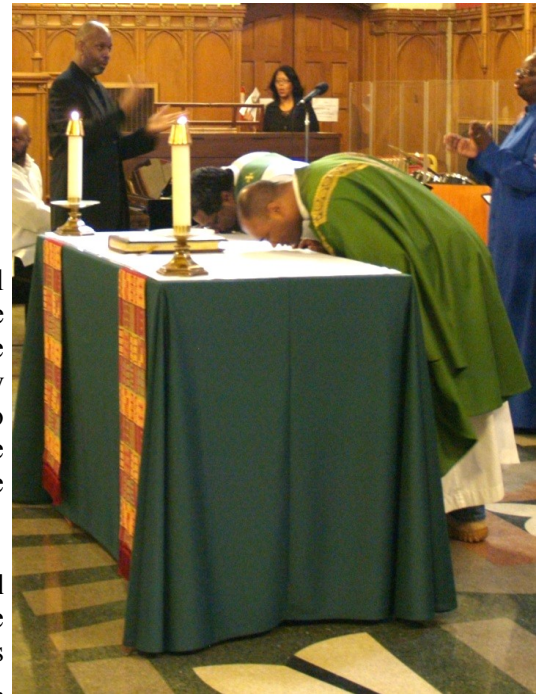
The significance of this kiss has had the following historical development: At first it was intended simply for the altar itself where the Sacrifice of the Lord would occur. Subsequently this idea was enlarged to include the understanding that the altar, built of stone, represented Christ himself, the rock, the cornerstone. (cf. 1 Cor. 10:4). Later, as the relics of saints were ordinarily placed within the altar stone, the kiss was also seen as a salutation of the saint and through the saint the whole Church Triumphant in heaven.

But why is there a kiss, rather than a bow or some other salutation? The kiss was actually very common in ancient culture. The temple was honored by kissing the threshold. Likewise, it was not uncommon in the ancient world to kiss the family meal table before the meal. Hence, it was not surprising to find the practice brought into Christian worship.

Until the 13th century it was customary at Rome to kiss the altar only upon coming in for Mass and departing. However, in the later Middle Ages the kissing of the altar seems to have been multiplied. In the Traditional Latin Mass prior to 1965, the altar was kissed numerous times:

- At the beginning of the Mass;
- Any time the priest turned away from the altar, faced the people and addressed them. According to one explanation the priest does this in order to confirm his communion with the Church Triumphant in heaven and then turns to greet the Church on earth;
- At the words *ex hac altare participatione* (Then as we receive from this altar...) in the canon;
- Before the sign of peace. Again an explanation advanced is that the priest kisses the altar here in order to receive the kiss from Christ, (whom the altar represents), in order to pass it on to others;
- Upon leaving the altar at the end of the Mass.

Today the altar is kissed only twice in conformity with the earlier tradition.





The design of Altars has varied over the years. The current practice of celebrating Mass facing the people has tended to require a rather simple table form to modern altars. But Mass facing the people is a rather recent phenomenon. Until very recently, Mass everywhere was celebrated with the priest and people facing the same direction, toward the East, or at least toward the Crucifix and tabernacle (if there was one on the altar). This allowed the altar design to be much more elaborate. Altars tended to back up onto the apse (back) wall and had a vertical dimension that was often quite splendid and decorative.

The Second Vatican Council directed that new altars should be free standing, that is, they should not be attached to the wall, and should allow the priest to walk around all four sides. While this was only for new altars, this tragically led some to conclude that many beautiful older altars should be removed. That was not however what the Council directed. While an altar facing the people tends to imply a simpler design, it is not necessarily required that this be so, since it is still possible to place ornate designs, called a reredos, in the area behind the altar if this is desired.

Our own parish still has the original altar (under the marble canopy) and that altar is still used when we say Latin Masses and for some private Masses. That altar is now often called the “high altar” since it is on a higher platform. It is also called the “altar of repose” since, on it, is the tabernacle where our Lord, in the Blessed Sacrament is reposed (or placed).

The main altar of our parish is the altar where almost all of our masses are celebrated. It has the simpler form of a table and it is possible for the celebrant to walk around all four sides of it. It also allows Mass to be celebrated facing the people, which is the widespread custom today.

Ideally, the altar should be made of stone and be fixed (immovable). Our main altar is not currently fixed and is made of wood. However, under the altar cloths there is a center section of stone, called the altar stone. Having the altar moveable and made of wood is not ideal. But for pastoral reasons it is good to have the flexibility of being able to move the altar and enlarge the sanctuary area for other liturgical functions and to permit occasional use of the high altar.



The altar is a place of great reverence, for on it takes place the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. It is fitting that it should be revered with a holy kiss. Further, it represents Christ, for the altar stone reminds us, as the old song says, that “Jesus is a rock in a weary land!” It is from the altar that we are fed the Body and Blood of Jesus. As St. Paul says, *[Our ancestors] drank from the rock that followed them in the desert, and the rock was Christ* (1 Cor 10:4). Christ is still our rock and still feeds us with the manna of his true flesh and drink that is his true blood.