

From June 28– 29 Bulletin

High Altar and the Tabernacle

(ALTARE SUMMUM or MAJUS.)

The high altar is so called from the fact that it is the chief altar in a church, and also because it is raised on an elevated plane in the sanctuary, where it may be seen simultaneously by all the faithful in the body of the church.

It symbolizes Christ, and it serves at the same time as the banquet table on which He offers Himself through the hands of the priest to the eternal Father; for Christ is present in our churches not only in a spiritual manner but really, truly, and substantially as the victim of a sacrifice.

A sacrifice necessarily supposes a priest and an altar, and the Acts of the Apostles plainly indicate that the faithful are to participate in the prayers of the sacrifice and to partake of the victim. Naturally the altar and priest were separated from the faithful, who, as St. Athanasius and Clement of Alexandria inform us, were instructed by the Apostles to pray, according to the traditions of the Mosaic Law, facing the East. Hence, in the early days of the church, the altar was usually placed in a chapel at the head of the sanctuary. The Altar looked directly towards the East in such a way that it could be seen from any part of the church by the faithful. When it was impossible to erect a church in such a manner the altar was located opposite the main doorway.

In early Christian times there was but one altar in a church. The Christian Fathers speak of one altar only, and St. Ignatius refers to this practice when he says: “One altar, as there is one bishop”. This altar was erected in the middle of the sanctuary between the bishop’s throne, which stood in the sanctuary, and the communion-rail, which separated the sanctuary from the body of the church. On it Divine services were celebrated by the bishop only, assisted by the clergy, who received Holy Communion from his hands.

In parish churches, the Most Blessed Sacrament is regularly kept on the high altar, which accordingly should have a tabernacle for the reservation of the Sacred Species.

The prescribed ornaments are a crucifix and six high candlesticks. The high altar in a church that is to be consecrated should be a fixed altar, which according to the prescriptions of the Roman Pontifical, is itself to be consecrated simultaneously with the solemn dedication of the church edifice. Hence it must stand free on all sides, allowing ample room for the consecrator to move around it. As its name indicates, the high altar, being the chief place for the enactment of the sacrificial function, is to be prominent not only by its position but also by the richness of its material and ornamentation. Apart from the liturgical part of the Mass, the tabernacle serves as the repository for the Eucharistic Presence and becomes the center of all the more solemn parochial functions of the year. (Catholic Encyclopedia)

Dear Holy Trinity Parishioners,

It has been almost one year since the diocese assigned me to our beautiful parish. Its amazing how much God has blessed this community over the years. Visitors often comment on the friendliness and hominess of Holy Trinity.

Now that I am the pastor, people often come to me with questions on various topics. Frequently asked questions are: "Why does Holy Trinity not have a Crucifix in the Sanctuary?" and "Where is the Tabernacle?" Many of these visitors are priests and even our own Bishop. When Bishop Sheridan was here for Confirmation he asked me to research the liturgical documents, especially since Vatican II, and find out what the requirements of the Church are regarding the decoration of a parish church.

For the next two weeks I would like to share with the parish what the actual Church documents say. This week I will tell you what the Church documents say about the crucifix and next week I will tell you what is said about the tabernacle. The documents are pretty self explanatory about some changes that we will be making in the near future.

God bless you!

Father Jim Williams, Pastor
Holy Trinity Catholic Church

**The crucifix is the principle ornament
of the main altar in the sanctuary.**

It is placed on or near the altar to remind us that the Victim offered on the altar is the same victim offered on the Cross. For this reason the crucifix must be placed on the altar as often as Mass is celebrated. Also every sacrament we celebrate in the sanctuary was born from the sacrifice on the cross. Therefore it is fitting to have a crucifix in the place where the sacraments are celebrated.

The directives of the Roman Missal prescribes that it be placed at the middle of the altar between candlesticks, and that it be large enough to be conveniently seen by both the celebrant and the people. If for any reason this crucifix is removed, another may take its place in a lower position; but in such cases it must always be visible to all who participate at Mass.

It is probable that the custom of placing a crucifix on the altar did not commence long before the sixth century. Benedict XIV holds that this custom comes down from the time of the Apostles. However, the earliest documentary evidence of placing a cross on the altar tells us that the early Christians were not accustomed to publicly expose the cross for fear of scandalizing the weak, and subjecting it to the insults of the pagans, but in its stead used symbols, e.g. an anchor, a trident, etc. A simple cross, without the figure of Christ, was fixed on the top of the ciboria (a canopy that covers many altars).

**The cross with the image of Christ crucified is a reminder of Christ's paschal mystery.
It draws us into the mystery of suffering
and makes tangible our belief that our suffering when united with the passion and death of Christ
leads to redemption.**

There should be a crucifix "positioned either on the altar or near it, and . . . clearly visible to the people gathered there." Since a crucifix placed on the altar and large enough to be seen by the congregation might well obstruct the view of the action taking place on the altar, other alternatives may be more appropriate. The crucifix may be suspended over the altar or affixed to the sanctuary wall. A processional cross of sufficient size, placed in a stand visible to the people following the entrance procession is another option. If the processional cross is to be used for this purpose, the size and weight of the cross should not preclude its being carried in procession. If there is already a cross in the sanctuary, the processional cross is placed out of view of the congregation following the procession. (Built of Living Stones, USCCB)

