

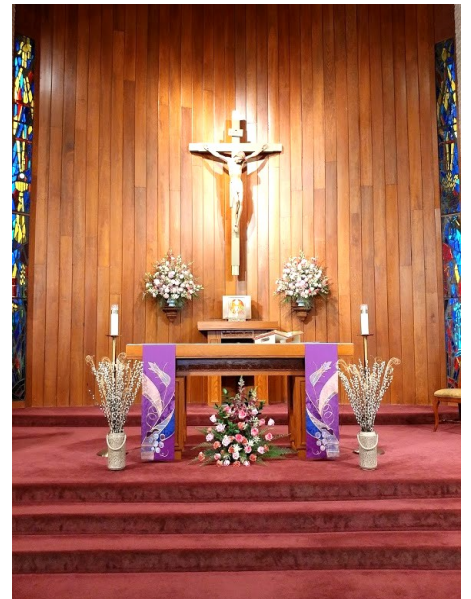
# The Altar

The altar, and the tabernacle with it, is the focal point of the church building. It is the material expression of the Church's worship. The church building is literally built around and over the altar. When a large church or cathedral was built, it was always the sanctuary that went up first.

The altar signifies the Table of the Lord, referring to the Last Supper, or the Cross, or Christ. The altar, representing Christ, is paid honor through incensing, bowing, and kissing. The altar is consecrated and five crosses are engraved on it, signifying Christ's five wounds.

The altar marks the place of the Lord's sacrifice. The word "altar" connotes a raised or high place (we see in Scripture the equivalent expressions "table," "Lord's table," and "place of sacrifice"). It is a place of consecration and sacrifice, where God meets man. It is a symbol of God's presence. The altar is, then, the only place that consecration of Holy Communion takes place.

Importantly, altars also mark the place of the tombs of martyrs and saints. Typically, the *mensa*, or top stone, has within it relics of the saints. This follows the early tradition of celebrating Mass over the tombs of the martyrs — those holy men and women who sacrificed their lives for the Church. The body or relic of the saint is a material reminder of Christ's one immemorial sacrifice and bodily death. In the early Church enormous efforts were made to construct altars and churches directly over the graves of these holy people.



- An altar is a place of sacrifice, a place of offering something to God, a place of encountering God. Jesus offered himself on earth on the "altar of the cross," and that offering is now made present on the Church's altars.
- Jesus is the "gift" being offered on the altar; the altar is to be as dignified as the sacrifice itself, thus Jesus (who sanctifies) is both the gift *and* the altar.
- Traditionally, the altar is made of stone and is immovable – although some countries, such as the United States, may use wood for the altar, provided it is "worthy, solid, and well-crafted." (GIRM 301) Why stone? St. Paul speaks of Christ as "the supernatural Rock" that accompanied the Israelites in the desert during their exodus from Egypt, the Rock from which flowed water for their sustenance. (1 Cor. 10:4; cf. Ex. 17:6) Sts. Paul and Peter identified Christ as the "cornerstone" (Eph. 2:20; 1 Pet. 2:6), and Jesus used this language referring to Himself. (cf. Luke 20:17-18)