

# Environment for Catholic Worship

## Part 2 The Altar

It is amazing that two of the most common daily activities that humans share—eating and drinking—are also the way Catholic Christians mark their most important encounter with the sacred. Yet, even though we often find ourselves “grabbing a bite” on the way to something more important or pressing, we can all

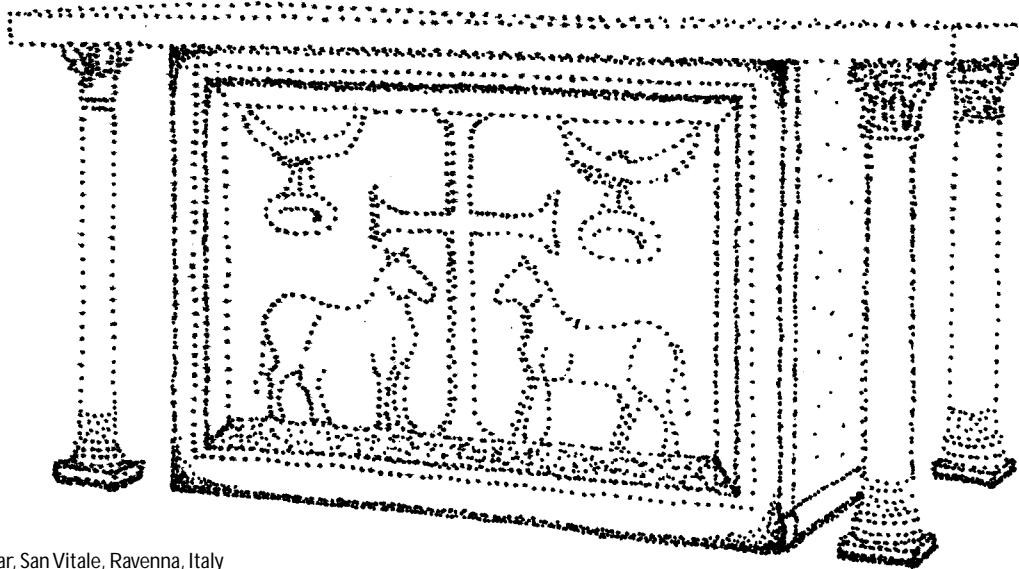
remember times in our lives when a meal meant more than fast food.

Think back to the most important meals in your life. It would be hard to imagine a wedding celebration without some sort of reception following. Funerals too, are often concluded with a meal shared by friends and family.

Jesus, who began his public ministry at the wedding feast at Cana and raised eyebrows by eating with notorious sinners, also chose to gather his closest companions to celebrate a special meal on the night before he died. Within the context of the Jewish Passover, he marked his

own Passover as the sacrificial lamb, by taking, blessing, breaking and sharing the most common of Mediterranean food staples—bread and wine. Now we do the same in his memory, and recognize his presence among us.

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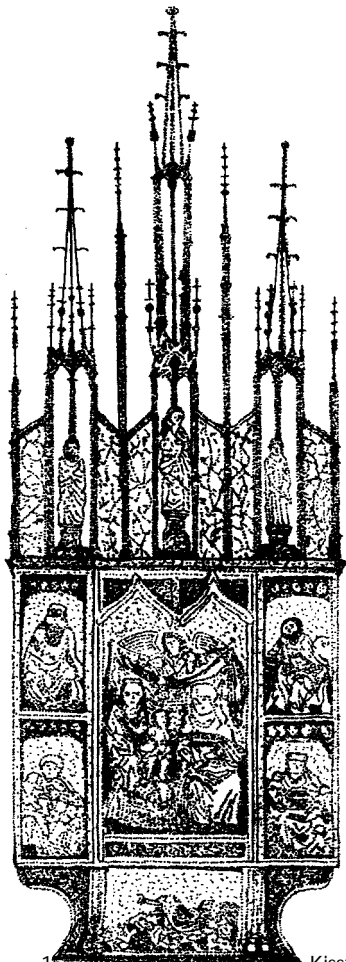
6<sup>th</sup> century altar, San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy

In many ancient cultures, altars were erected as stone slabs to offer crops or animal or even human victims as a sacrifice to the deity. In our buildings for worship, we also call the table of the Eucharist an altar on which a ritual, sacrificial meal makes present the paschal mystery—Christ’s life, death and resurrection. We join our lives with Christ in this offering to the Father.

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 table for daily

meals to one more suited to the ritual meal. It became taller and more square. Though it frequently retained aspects of a table, it was, at times, also fashioned from 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 or *reredos*. Sometimes a canopy of cloth or wood extended over the altar to



15<sup>th</sup> century winged altar piece, Kiszeben, Hungary

further define the space. Tabernacles were often placed in the center of these altars, and the liturgy was conducted principally from the altar. Frequently, multiple side altars were also erected throughout a church.

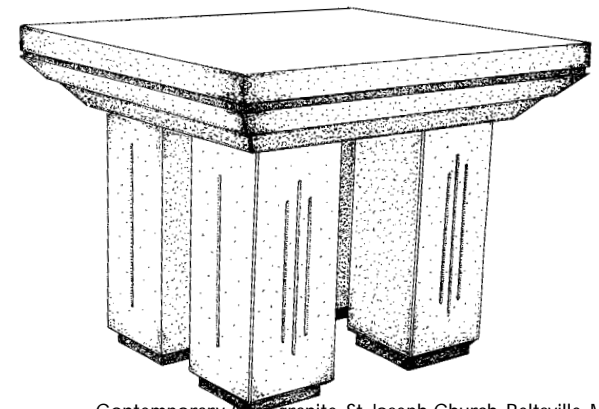
In the recent past, in a recovery of an early understanding of the Eucharist, altars have moved closer to the assembly and are to be designed to express both the meal and sacrificial dimensions of the Eucharist. Only the bread and the wine and the sacramentary book are ordinarily to be placed on it. 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.

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 of 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 comes." 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) Since the Church teaches that "the altar is Christ," (RCDA, ch 4, no. 4) its composition should reflect the nobility, beauty, strength, and simplicity of the One it represents. In new churches there is to be only one altar so that it "signifies to the assembly of the faithful the one Christ and the one Eucharist of the Church." (GIRM 303) [56]

The altar is the natural focal point of the sanctuary and is to be "freestanding to allow the [priest] to walk



Contemporary Altar, granite, St. Joseph Church, Beltsville, MD

around it easily and Mass to be celebrated facing the people." (GIRM 299)

During the Liturgy of the Eucharist, the altar must be visible from all parts of the church but not so elevated that it causes visual or symbolic division from the liturgical assembly. Methods of elevation can be found that still allow access to the altar by ministers who need wheelchairs or who have other disabilities. [59]

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Author/Illustrator: Thomas V. Stehle, Liturgical Design Consultant  
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