

THE SANCTUARY AND THE ALTAR

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

ALTAR CANOPY

Required by liturgical law to cover at least the altar and predella (to denote the dignity of the altar and the priest, which represent) there are several names that refer to distinct types:

- Baldacino (*baldachinum* and in English, *baldaquin*): a canopy made of textile suspended from the ceiling. The word comes from the Italian word for “*Baghdad*” where the type of textile (made from silk wool and metallic warp) once came from. This term is often mistakenly used in reference to a ciborium or civory.
- Ciborium, civory: a canopy borne by columns.
- Tester: a canopy suspended from the ceiling, or even attached directly to the ceiling. This is a particular favorite of English-style churches

AMBO

A pulpit-like lectern, from which the Epistle and Gospel were once read. Some churches had two, located on either side of the sanctuary, while other churches had only one. Often the ambo(s) was located on the rood screen and had to be ascended by a stairway, whence came the name, *Gradual (steps)* referring to the proper chanted before the *Gospel*, for it would be chanted while the deacon (often with the subdeacon, thurifer and acolytes) would ascend the steps while it was sung. St. Clement’s Basilica in Rome still has matching ambos.

ANTEPENDIUM [altar frontal]

A rectangular vestment used to cover the front of the altar. The term comes from the fact that it is often hung in front of the altar either from a suspending rod just under the mensa or from the middle altar cloth.

APSE

The rounded back portion of a sanctuary.

CATHEDRA [throne]

The raised backed and canopied chair on which the bishop sits.

CHANCEL [choir, presbyterium]

The portion of the sanctuary, in which the clergy and/or schola are situated.

CHANCEL SCREEN

Some churches, specifically cathedrals, used to also have chancel screen, a low wall that surrounded the chancel stalls within the sanctuary proper. Its purpose was practical, to focus the voices and to prevent drafts. St. Clements Basilica in Rome has one of the last examples.

CREDESCENCE [credence table]

The table upon which are prepared the cruets, lavabo other items during Mass. During Solemn High Mass, the chalice assembly is placed under the humeral veil on the credence, instead of on the altar. Considered as an extension of the altar, it should be constructed from the same materials as the altar, and should be covered with a top linen and a frontal, either of linen or vestment material.

CONOPAENUM

The tabernacle veil that covers a free-standing tabernacle on all sides. This Greek work refers to the mosquito netting formerly used for enveloping beds. This is the proper type of tabernacle veil, as the 2 hanging curtains so often seen covering just the tabernacle door(s) do not fulfill liturgical prescriptions.

DOSSAL CURTAIN

A curtain that is placed behind the altar, which can be either the seasonal color, a decorative color (cloth of gold, white, green, or red) or of the vestments.

FALDSTOOL

Meaning a *folded chair* in Old English, this used by a bishop in place of the throne in certain circumstances. When used, it is situated either on the Epistle-side *in plano* or on the predella.

FOOT

The first altar step *in plano*, or the foot (the base) of the altar. Generally this refers to the *center* and *front* portion of the first altar step. However, this can also refer to the Epistle and Gospel-sides of the Foot.

GRADINE

The *shelf* on the altar on which the candles and flowers are generally placed. This is an addition to the altar, though it is not absolutely necessary, nor is it considered to be part of the altar.

MENSA

The *table* of the altar on which Mass is said.

NARTHEX [vestibule]

The portion of the church where the catechumens once attended Mass. However, they were dismissed (the derivative of *Ite, missa est*) at the *Offertory*. The holy water fonts are now located here, whereas previously a fountain was located in the exterior court, and there too the ritual cleansing of the hands took place, which the use of holy water now has supplanted. Other ceremonial functions are held in the narthex as well.

NAVE

The portion of the church where the laity are situated

PREDELLA [footpace]

The platform or top step on which the celebrant stands during the celebration of Mass.

REREDOS (retablo, altar screen)

An ornately carved screen placed behind the altar.

RIDDEL POSTS

The posts that were located at the front sides of the altar. Curtains were hung from these, and candles were placed on top of the posts on feast days. These curtains served a symbolic as well as a practical purpose. Symbolically, they represent the curtains that composed the tabernacle of Moses, and practically, they prevent drafts.

ROOD SCREEN

A high lattice screen made out of stone, wood or metal that formerly separated the nave from the sanctuary. In Europe, most of these were torn down during the Protestant upheavals, though some examples still exist. The Communion Rail now replaces it in most churches.

SEDILLA

The bench or stool on which the sacred ministers or celebrant sits upon.

STIPES

The vertical supports for the altar. These are anointed when an altar is consecrated.

TRANSEPT

A side aisle of the church. This is often divided from the nave by a series of arches, which helps to form a passage way.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ALTAR

The altar is the *raison d'être*¹ for the church building. Without the altar, the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass could not be celebrated. The altar from Apostolic times, has been in either the shape of a table, or in the shape of a block, either in rectangular or cube form. The wooden table of the Last Supper is displayed for veneration in a special chapel in the Basilica of St. John Lateran's², while the wooden table that St. Peter celebrated Mass upon when he was in Rome is now enshrined within the high altar.

At first, Mass was celebrated in the catacombs on the sepulchres of the martyrs on their *die nativitatis* (their *birthday* into Heaven). This is confirmed by St. John's book of the Apocalypse, "...And I saw under the altar, those who were slain for the Word of God". The tombs of the martyrs then, were the first altar stones. In many churches throughout the world, a body of a martyr or saint (with an altar stone, if the saint was not a martyr) is still enshrined within the body of the altar itself. Later on, it became a church law, that Mass had to be celebrated over a martyr's body in the form of an altar stone. We will discuss the altar stone below.

Unfortunately, since the Middle Ages, the true form of the altar has been mutated with the unhappy result of turning the altar into an exposition throne, or in the form of a tiered wedding cake. This in turn has for the most part, obliterated the focus due to the altar alone, and has turned the altar into just a support for an elaborate array of shelves, niches and arches.

However, during the late 19th century, a liturgical movement began that attempted to restore the Catholic ideal of the altar. Unfortunately, some of these liturgists also fell prey to some of the modernist influences upon the historical studies that were being undertaken at the time³. Nevertheless, their work is of great value for what truth lies in it, and their writings should not be easily discarded. It should also be noted, that while the actual form of a liturgical altar may seem to be rather modernist, let us bear in mind first, that the modernists, instead of promulgating pure error, will always take a truth or a good thing and twist it into something erroneous by simply placing an incorrect *emphasis* on the subject. The Devil is never original and this has been the case with every

¹ The *raison d'être*.

² Also called the Archbasilica of the Holy Savior, and this is actually the mother church of Catholicism, not St. Peter's as some Catholics mistakenly believe.

³ For instance, some postulated that historically at least, Mass was once said facing the people, and the high altar in Constantine's Basilica of St. Peter's was often given as an example. However, it can readily be shown that this was not the case. In the ancient Sacramentaries of the Vatican, one can find a now disused rubric for the archdeacon that applies to this case. Constantine was compelled to build St. Peter's facing slightly west, instead of east. Due to this fact, the Pope, when celebrating Mass, would turn to face the nave during the orations, so that he might face east. However, it was during these times that the Archdeacon would chant to the people in the nave, "*Conversus orienti!*" "*Let us turn to the east!*" So the people were not even *facing* the altar during these portions of the Mass. Later on, this custom of turning to the east was dropped.

heresy that has afflicted the Church. This has been especially been done concerning the altar of Sacrifice, which the *Novus Ordo* has mutated into the altar of thanksgiving (which it is, but not primarily, nor alone).

THE LITURGICALLY CORRECT ALTAR

A liturgically correct altar should face east, be *fixed*, freestanding, constructed out of non-porous stone, without any attachments such as a throne (for the cross or monstrance), side wings or a reredos, preferably without a gradine, though the employment of one is tolerated, vested with an *antependium* on the front⁴ and covered⁵ with some form of canopy. Likewise, the tabernacle should be freestanding, so that it can be covered with a *conopaenum*. The steps of the altar should be ranged in an odd numbered set, though even one step is sufficient, and in fact, some of the cathedrals in Europe, have only one step for the high altar.

A church and its high altar should face east, because east represents the Heavenly Jerusalem and the rising sun is a symbol of Our Lord's Resurrection.

A *fixed* altar is an altar that cannot be moved, because it has been cemented to the predella, and it can therefore be consecrated. An altar that has been constructed out of wood or plaster is considered to be a *movable* altar, since it is not permanent and therefore cannot be consecrated. On a *movable* altar, it is the altar stone inserted into the *mensa* and only the altar stone that is the actual altar. The altar stone must be large enough to accommodate the greater portion of the paten and the chalice.

However, it is the entire *mensa* of a fixed altar that is consecrated. Five crosses are carved into the four corners and the middle of the *mensa* to represent the wounds of Christ. During the ceremony of consecrating an altar these crosses are blessed, anointed with holy oils and immolated with burning grains of incense. Also, a sepulcher is hollowed out near the center, front edge of the altar. Into this sepulcher is placed at least one relic of a martyr, though others may be inserted as well. This sepulcher is also sealed with a lid that matches the *mensa* and cement. An altar stone is consecrated in the same manner as an altar *mensa*, though it is much smaller.

The altar should be covered with a frontal called an *antependium*, as the altar mystically represents the Christ's body. This frontal acts as a vestment and it is the color of the Mass being celebrated. The only time that the altar should not be covered with this frontal is from the *Dividerunt* of Holy Thursday (which symbolizes the stripping of Christ's garments by the soldiers) until the Vigil of Easter Sunday. This symbolism is so important to the Church that it has codified it as a liturgical law and should therefore be observed in all churches.

Likewise the tabernacle should be covered with a *conopaenum*, which is a veil that envelops the *entire* tabernacle, and not just the front portion.

The canopy is not only a matter of symbolism, but also of reverence and of liturgical law. In almost every culture, an important person or object is covered with a canopy to show the dignity and reverence that is due to it. Likewise, in the Roman Rite, the act of covering objects that have sacred significance is greatly practiced. There are several different forms that can be used for covering the altar:

- ciborium or civory; often incorrectly referred to as a baldachino (which is another form), this canopy rests on columns, be the number four or two.
- tester or baldachino; these forms *hang* above the altar. The tester is usually made of wood, while the baldachino is made of cloth, and like the dossal curtain, may be changed in color.

THE APPOINTMENTS FOR THE ALTAR

It is more proper that the candlesticks and altar crucifix be placed directly on the *mensa* itself, however it is also permitted to put both on a gradine, to hang the crucifix above the altar, to even place it standing behind the altar, or even to attached it to the rear of the altar by means of a staff⁶. The arm of the crucifix should also be placed slightly above the level of the candles. It use to be the Roman practice to graduate the candles towards the center of the altar, but now it is the common practice to have them all of equal height.

⁴ If the choir is situated *behind* the altar, as in some cases in Europe, then an *antependium* is also required for the back of the altar.

⁵ Along with the predella.

⁶ Sometimes called the *Montecassino* form after the monastery that popularized this practice.

Formerly, altar cards were not used at all, as the celebrant either referred to the texts in the missal or had them memorized. However, it is now the custom to use three altar cards for some of the crucial formulas, though the missal only calls for all of these formulas to be placed on two cards, which are to be placed to the rear of the center of the *mensa*.

Reliquaries are not considered to be permanent items on the altar, and should technically be only on the altar during a High Mass when they are venerated during the times the altar is incensed.

Rubricians are in common consent in regards to the use of flowers on the altar: as altar decorations, they should be used with the greatest restraint and in rightful accord with the rank of the feast, hence having flowers on the altar for every Sunday is not the best practice. Nor should their placement ever interfere with the execution, as the ceremonies take precedence over mere decorations.

THE SANCTUARY AND ITS LAYOUT

There are two main portions of the sanctuary, the altar proper and the chancel, which many small churches in the United States do not have⁷. The Communion Rail commonly separates the sanctuary from the nave, though the rood or chancel screen formerly performed this function. When this occurred, it was often difficult to see what was taking place at Mass⁸, which is the reason why the bells came into use, and the custom of the celebrant breaking the silence during the *Nobis quoque peccatoribus* and the *celebrant's Domine non sum dignus*. The sanctuary represents Heaven, while the nave represents Earth.

The chancel and not the choir loft, is the correct location for the schola to sing from. Choir lofts are rather a modern innovation, due to the introduction of women singers, whose parts were once performed by boys' scholas⁹. The chancel may be located in front of, behind or to the side of the altar proper. At one time, the chancel would be constructed with a surrounding screen, either of stone, wood or metal, so as to protect the clergy from drafts. The basilica of St. Clement in Rome has one of the few examples remaining of this practice.

The sedilla is placed on the Epistle-side of the sanctuary. The sedilla is reserved for the sacred ministers alone, and servers should not sit on it. A properly constructed sedilla should be a single bench for all three sacred ministers or a stool for the celebrant alone without a back¹⁰ or arm rests.

The cathedra is placed on the Gospel-side of the sanctuary. It is used by a bishop who has the right or privilege to do so. The cathedra is an ornate backed chair that signifies the teaching authority of the bishop, is covered with a canopy and backdrop curtain of similar material and color (green is used for a bishop, red for a cardinal). The cathedra is also elevated on a dais. However, this can never be equal to or higher than the predella.

The faldstool is a *folding chair*, which the bishop uses in the stead of the cathedra. This is used if the bishop does not have the privilege to use the cathedra, or if he celebrates a Pontifical Mass of Requiem, an Ember day, in the presence of a greater prelate and at other appointed times. When used, it is placed near the Epistle-side of the Foot.

The credence is also placed on the Epistle-side of the sanctuary. On it are placed the various items that are used for Mass, but are not placed on the altar. A credence was also used by the Israelites in the Holy of Holies in the Temple for the Proposition Breads and the Wine. In the Eastern Rites it is still used for their elaborate manner of preparing the host, though in the Roman Rite this always occurs on the altar.

⁷ Though almost every parish church in England does.

⁸ In the Eastern Rites, it is almost impossible to see what partakes during the most sacred portions of the Divine Liturgy, due to the Iconstasis screen.

⁹ Or even men singing in *false* tone.

¹⁰ A concession for a low back was later allowed by the SRC, though preferably constructed with a slit between the seat and back portions so the chasuble could drape straight through.