

The Dedication Liturgy

by Fr. Tim Church

A few comments about our upcoming dedication Mass might be helpful. This typically only occurs once in the life of a parish, and some explanation is in order.

The Catholic Church regards a Church building very highly. The whole concept of sacred space is imbedded in our history, stretching back to our Jewish ancestors. Places where earth and heaven seem to touch in a mysterious encounter with God are common to every religion. Monuments and buildings were constructed on these holy places, and were revisited for hundreds, even thousands of years.

As Christians, these holy places first revolved around events in the life of Jesus. The places where any significant event took place were revered in even the first days of the Church's life, and still today are of great value. Even the objects of his life, like the cross, are revered, and seem to have the power to make a place sacred in our eyes. As we placed a cross on top of our building, it seemed to be a moment when the character of the building changed. It had become something different for us.

One of the ways that the Church has "made holy" a building that was to be used for the Mass is to place relics in the Church, or more specifically, under the altar. These relics usually consisted of the bodies of martyrs, who had given their life for the sake of their love of God and his Church. This venerable custom is a significant part of our liturgy of dedication. A procession is formed that includes the deacon, vested in a red dalmatic, carrying the relics. In our Church the relics of five saints will be placed beneath the altar. They are St. Jude, apostle and martyr, Pope St. Gregory the Great, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, St. Theresa of Lisieux, and St. Maria Goretti, martyr.

As the bishop arrives at the door to the Church, those who have been involved in the construction present the keys and other tokens of their work. He instructs Fr. Tim to open the doors, and the procession enters the Church. Included in the procession are randomly selected members of the parish. While the whole community could not practically enter the Church in procession, this representative group helps us to sense the excitement of first entering this place to worship God.

The liturgy creates a sense of anticipation even after the procession has arrived. None of the lights have been turned on, and even though at the time of the service in the afternoon the Church will not be dark, the full brightness of the space is not yet unveiled. The candles are not lit, except those that accompany the relics, and no incense is used. After the greeting, the sprinkling rite replaces the more typical penitential rite. The singing of the Gloria is followed by the opening prayer. Following very ancient customs, the lectors for the first and second readings come to the bishop to receive his blessing. The whole assembly is blessed by the bishop holding the lectionary over the people as the sign of God's blessing. The Gospel is proclaimed in the usual way, but without candles or incense. The bishop's homily is followed by the Litany of the Saints. This wonderful chant is used at very special times in the Church, such as ordinations and the Vigil of Easter.

The liturgy of dedication comes now to its high point, focused on the altar. The relics of the saints are deposited in a small opening at the base of the altar. A mason closes the aperture and places the dedicatory plaque over the place. The prayer of dedication is said. Following this prayer, in a dramatic gesture, the bishop anoints the altar with the oil of chrism, used in the sacraments of initiation and ordination. Priests are sent out from the altar to anoint the walls of the Church at four points. The places of anointing remain identified by four crosses and four candles. Then a brazier is set on the altar in which hot coals are placed. The bishop pours in a large quantity of incense and the church is filled with the odor of prayer, the visible sign of smoke rising to heaven. Then the thurifer incenses the whole Church. The altar is cleaned of the oil and covered with a cloth. Flowers are set to adorn the altar.

The bishop directs the deacon to light the candles of the altar and the candles at the places of anointing. The whole church is filled with the light and joy of God's people gathered to praise the Lord who promised to always be with us.