

The Mass (Part VIII)

by Fr. Tim Church

THE SANCTUARY

After genuflecting, the priest enters the sanctuary and, together with the deacon, he reverences the altar with a kiss. The altar represents the body of the Lord and a kiss is an ancient sign of reverence, respect and, in our culture, affection.

The suspected origin of kissing the altar is that the same gesture was first afforded the altar cross. Since the first altars were probably free standing (like ours) the altar cross was behind it. The priest approached the cross, which may have actually been the processional cross, and kissed it.

As the altar became attached to the wall, the cross (which was now a crucifix, with the image of Jesus' body) was affixed to the wall above it, inaccessible to the priest's gesture of affection. So, the kiss was transferred to the altar, an equally appropriate object of our affection.

Occasionally, a further sign of honor is afforded the altar with the use of incense. The priest walks about the altar swinging the thurible (also called a censer). As we said earlier, incense is both a symbol of prayer and a physical means of helping us become aware of the mystery and wonder of God's presence.

The priest then moves to the chair. While this is usually a merely functional piece of furniture, more is made of the chair in Catholic architecture. To best understand this, we need to think of the father of a family, and where he may sit to preside over the family table. Some families have the custom that when the father (or grandfather) dies, his place is left empty at family gatherings for a space of time. The chair itself has become the image of fatherly care and guidance.

The same is true in the Church. Although sometimes raised up and ornate, the presider's chair is not to have the appearance of a throne. In the calendar of feasts there is a wonderful celebration of the "Chair of St. Peter." Although the throne in the Basilica bearing his name in Rome is grand and impressive, the real "chair" is a small bench from which Peter presided over the flock in Rome. The priest's chair represents his pastoral care of the parish, offered under the direction of the bishop, and in the spirit of the Apostles.

Even when we come to the Church for private devotions outside the Mass, the presence of the presider's chair should remind us that Jesus has not left his Church without pastoral direction, leadership and care. The whole hierarchical order of the Church, including even, of course, the Pope, is represented in that chair.

One little curiosity concerning the priest and the chair is that he would only very rarely speak to the gathered community while sitting. He is typically to stand at the chair. Only the bishop addresses the people while sitting, as an indication of his pastoral office and as the chief teacher of the faith in our diocese. In times past, and still today in some places, teachers always remained seated to give

instruction. It is noteworthy that the chief church of the diocese is called the cathedral in reference to the bishop's chair (cathedra) which is located in that church.