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The Altar of Sacrifice

Rev. Gerald Hellem

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June 1, 1964

Mr. William A. Keyser, Jr.
College of Fine and Applied Arts
Rochester Institute of Technology
Rochester, New York

Dear Mr. Keyser:

I respectfully submit herewith my thesis entitled "The Altar of Sacrifice" in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

Sincerely yours,

Rev. Gerald Hellem, S.V.D.
THE ALTAR OF SACRIFICE

by

Rev. Gerald Hellem, S.V.D.

Candidate for the Master of Fine Arts in the
College of Fine and Applied Arts of the
Rochester Institute of Technology
Rochester, New York

June 1, 1964

Adviser: Mr. William A. Keyser, Jr.
PREFACE

The present work is by no means as complete as it might possibly be. No definite historical material could be found which traced the development of the altar back to the time of Christ. It was at this time that the foundations of this study were first laid. The Acts of the Apostles and other limited sources, however, yielded clues and pointed the way to other mines of information that gave up their treasures of historical fact after much digging and probing. Nevertheless, enough has been pieced together concerning the history of wood in terms of its use in constructing altars to make the study worth-while and interesting. However, since the use of stone has challenged the use of wood in this history, and eventually has completely taken over as far as the Catholic Church's liturgical altar of today is concerned, no attempt has been made to limit the scope of this study to wood altars. In addition to this it also seemed necessary to include the element of sacrifice with the historical fact of the altar since the two facts are always found together. Therefore, this research problem has been entitled The Altar of Sacrifice.

The treatment of the altar of sacrifice reaches back to the time of Christ and moves up to our present day. Naturally, the closer we come to the sacrifice of Christ, the harder it becomes to come up with sources. But we have found a few. However, only those altars which came within the focus of Catholic worship were dealt with. The altars that may have been employed in Protestant worship and the worship of other religions were left out and considered as beyond the scope of this thesis.
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Figure 2. The main altar of St John's Basilica. The Holy Father alone uses this altar. It is constructed of marble.
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CHAPTER I

THE ALTAR AND THE LAST SUPPER TABLE

The altar is the focal point of most of the ceremonies of the Catholic Church. It should receive the best possible treatment in construction and positioning because of its mystical symbolism; it is Christ Himself. The reason of every church's existence should be the altar and it should be so placed and so constructed that it would appear to be the very center and reason for the church's construction.

The altar was not always as it is today. It is not exempt from change in a changing world; though it may change externally, the symbolism always remains the same. At certain periods, however, in the history of the altar this symbolism stood out more than at other periods. When the altar was simple, there was not much to distract the mind from the true meaning of the altar.

It was at the Last Supper in the Upper Room, together with His Apostles on the day before His terrible passion and death that Christ told His Apostles that they were to do as He had done; that they were also to take bread and wine into their hands and to speak those powerful words over these gifts and thus transform them into Christ's own flesh and blood. St. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians tells of the institution of this ceremony:

For the tradition which I handed on to you came to me from the Lord Himself: that the Lord Jesus, on the night of His arrest, took bread and, after giving thanks to God, broke it and said: 'This is my body, which is for you; do this as a memorial of me.' In the same way, he took the cup after supper, and said: 'This cup is the
Figure 3. A secondary wooden altar set up in St. John's Basilica close to the main altar. It is used on special occasions by dignitaries other than the Holy Father.

Figure 4. An ancient fresco in the excavated church below the present day St. Clement's Basilica. It illustrates St. Clement celebrating the Mass at a very ancient small and square altar.
new covenant sealed by my blood. Whenever you drink it, do this as a memorial of me.' For every time you eat this bread and drink the cup you proclaim the death of the Lord, until he comes.
(I Corinthians, 11,23-26.)

The command of Christ to the apostles was to do as he had done. It is very probable that the first instances of the celebrations of the newly instituted ritual were celebrated as feasts or banquets. Ordinary tables were used, even the very same wooden table that was used by Christ at the Last Supper in the very beginning.

There were no altars in the very early Christian times according to the proper sense of the word. The same tables used for the ordinary meals were also used for the Eucharistic celebration. In the very early times these tables must have been large since the table of the Last Supper was presumably large. It certainly must have been large enough to accommodate all the twelve apostles. However, as time went on and probably soon after the Ascension of Our Lord into Heaven the tables became smaller. The ordinary household table was used and it was likely returned to its ordinary domestic use after the celebration of the mysteries. There were no altars properly so called and because of this the early Christians were accused of being atheistic. Altars according to the pagan and Jewish sense were massive structures of stone exclusively set aside for offering sacrifices. The early Christians did not have any such altars. They did not even have a word for "altar". The official place for the Christians to offer sacrifice was termed "The Table of the Lord."

It did not take long for the idea of a sacrifice to deepen in the minds of the early Christians and they began early to set aside special furnishings which could be used to celebrate the "Table of the Lord." The banquet portion, called the "Agape" (love feast), was gradually separated from the "Lord's Supper," the Sacrifice proper. Slowly the
Figure 5. The early Tripod Altar. The illustration is from a fresco preserved in the catacomb of St. Calistus, Rome, Italy.

Figure 6. An ancient pagan altar found in the Excavations beneath the present day St. Clement's Basilica, in Rome. This altar was dedicated to Mithras, a god born of rock. This altar dates back to times before the Christians.
Eucharistic Sacrifice began to be celebrated in very definite places and with definite rites and surroundings. One can imagine, with communications as they were in those days, that these rites and services were not a matter of universal agreement from place to place. But the infant Church was beginning to slowly develop some definite signs of its own religious services. The table used at the Eucharistic celebration gradually became a definite and reserved table; it became the "altar".

The first uniform altar seems to have been in use throughout the latter part of the first century and in the second in the form of a small tripod table. This type of table was common in houses of the well-to-do as a part of the regular household furnishings. The "altar" was large enough to hold the "oblata" for the sacrifice. A picture of such an altar in fresco can be seen in the catacomb of St. Calistus. The picture is of the simple tripod altar with the gifts of bread and fish lying upon it and a priest standing nearby with his arms outstretched in prayer. The early deacons of the Church could have been entrusted with the responsibility of setting the altar in place when the sacrifice was to take place and removing it again to its own proper place after the completion of the ceremonies. It was a matter of prestige for the altar table to have a definite shape so that all could recognize it as the "Table of the Lord", and learn to respect it. These early tripod altars were not specially consecrated. It was considered sufficient that they were set aside for their special purpose by the offering of the sacrifice upon them; the blood of Christ Himself gave the altars the only consecration deemed proper and fitting.
Figure 7. The main altar in St. Paul’s Basilica in Rome, Italy.

Figure 8. An altar in the Roman Forum. The chapel the altar is in is very ancient (note the frescoes in the walls). The altar was dedicated in 1955.
CHAPTER II

MATERIALS USED IN ALTAR CONSTRUCTION

It is very common opinion that the first altars were constructed from wood. All authors agree that wood was the common material for household tables even in the time of Christ. The Last Supper table was in all probability constructed from wood, since it was a common table of a household. Because of this wood seemed to be the most suitable material for the construction of altars. There can be no doubt that wood was at times substituted by other materials in altar construction, but wood remained the common material for altar construction for several centuries. There was no legislation proscribing the use of wood until the sixth century.\textsuperscript{14}

It was at the Council of Epaone in Burgundy in the year 517 that the consecration of altars with chrism was forbidden unless these altars were constructed from stone.\textsuperscript{15} The decree did not forbid the use of wood outright, it only forbade the consecration of the wooden altar. Wood still remained the most common material for altars as late as the eleventh century in England and it is related that wooden altars were "demolished" by St. Wulstan, Bishop of Worcester (1062-1095). There is an occasional mention of wooden altars in France and Spain at a still later date.\textsuperscript{16} The rubrics of the \textit{Roman Pontifical} prescribe stone for all altars and this book of ceremonies was published in 1596.\textsuperscript{17}

No real proof can be offered to show that the Eucharistic Sacrifice was generally offered upon the tombs of the martyrs. The sacrifice
Figure 9. An altar in St. Prudentiana's Church in Rome. The altar top is supported by a reliquary which contains a wooden slab which St. Peter is said to have used to offer the Sacrifice of the Mass when he was in Rome. (The author can vouch that the reliquary does contain a wooden slab. He inspected it with a flashlight through the glass window of the reliquary.)

Figure 10. A plaque on the wall near to the above altar. "On this altar Saint Peter offered the body and blood of the Lord for the living and the dead and to increase the number of the faithful, and it is a privileged altar in behalf of the dead"
at the tombs of the martyrs seems to have been reserved to the anniversaries of their deaths. Even then the more common practice seems to have been to build a wooden altar before the shrine of the martyr or to cover the tomb with a special marble slab which would be reserved for this purpose.18

After the Edict of Milan brought about by the Emperor Constantine (313) the Church was freed from the bonds that held it in subjection and the wooden altar was gradually abandoned in favor of stone, marble, or precious metals when there came a question of building an altar in a large church. The altar became heavy and massive and was permanently fixed to a definite spot, this being within a temple or a church. During the persecutions the light wooden altar could easily be moved or hidden and thus saved from profanation. Once the persecutions were passed and the Church was free, it was no longer necessary to take precautions against profanation and it became fitting that the altar should remain attached to a definite place. These same circumstances helped to bring about the introduction of permanent stone altars; they were solid and usually of larger proportions than previously used.19 (Solid in the sense of being permanently fixed. Not in the sense that the table idea was abandoned.) These altars fitted more gracefully into the surroundings of the massive churches which the early Christians were wont to build. It is also possible that the stone pagan altars had something to do with the decision of adopting stone altars in the Christian services. Even some of the pagan temples were eventually taken over and devoted to Christian worship. The pagan altars in these temples in many instances were adapted to the Christian concept of a table before being used.20
Figure 11. The most ancient altar that the author found. This altar dates from the tenth century and possibly earlier. It is preserved in an ancient Oriental Rite Monastery at Gottaferata, Italy.

Figure 12. The same altar from a closer view and with the antependium lifted.
The mystical considerations also had their parts to play in determining the use of stone over that of wood. Christ Himself is regarded as the altar of His own Sacrifice; He is, in the words of St. Paul and St. Peter, the "Cornerstone upon which the holy temple of the faithful should be built and sustained." (I Corinthians, 10,4; Ephesians, 2,20; 1 Peter, 2,4.) The symbolism was certainly brought out much clearer by the use of stone.\(^{21}\) The table feature was preserved all along, down to our present day. The altar was made up of essentially two parts, the base and the top. The top table portion was joined to the bottom base by a special ceremony. This anointing ceremony certainly goes back to the time of the publication of the *Roman Pontifical*; just how far back it goes from this publication is not certain, but an anointing is mentioned in the decrees of the Council of Epaone in 517. Just why the table idea was so rigidly clung to is not certain, but it could have been to preserve the connection with the Last Supper table. It could have been at the same time a means of very clearly defining the difference between the Christian altar and the pagan one.\(^{22}\)

Although it is still the custom to build the altar in the form of a table, the author has seen an instance in which an altar has been constructed from one solid block of travertine marble. A rescript or permission had to be obtained from the Sacred Congregation of Rites at Rome, not to consecrate this block of marble as an altar, but to omit the customary ceremonies of joining the top with the bottom portion. This altar is located in the Tertiate of the Society of the Divine Word in Nemi, Italy.\(^{23}\)

With the development of the martyr cult the altars sometimes took the shape of a burial vault or sarcophagus. These, too, were made from
Figure 13. The Capella Greca; a small room in the catacomb of St. Priscilla in which the Holy Sacrifice was celebrated on the anniversaries of the death of the Martyrs buried here.
marble. The table-tomb connection was made in this way. Christ was symbolized by the altar, but He was not complete without His members. Of these members the martyrs were regarded as the most illustrious and, indeed, as the most closely united to Him. They had "washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb" (Apocalypse 6,9.). Thys symbolic language of the Apolalypse was given real meaning and expression by the actual placing of the relics of the martyrs within the altar.
Figure 14. The main altar at the Tertiate of the Divine Word Missionaries in Nemi, Italy. This is the first altar which the author knows of that breaks with the traditional concept of the table-altar. This Altar is constructed from one solid block of marble.

Figure 15. The same altar from a side elevation. The one solid block of marble is very apparent in this picture.
CHAPTER III

THE ALTAR POSITION

In the beginning of Christianity the table was used as an altar and it is likely that it stood in the center of the congregation. When the tripod table was introduced it, too, was possibly placed in the middle of the assembly so that all could see the ceremonies. When there were to be lengthy instructions during the services it is reasonable to suppose that the altar or table was moved toward the front of the meeting place so that the minister would have his back to no one; all would be able to see and hear him better.

Because of the repeated instructions, it could have developed that the altar was rather permanently set up in the front of the halls. In the beginning it is difficult to imagine services without any instructions. Thus in all probability the altar very early took a front position in the churches.

When the large churches were built after the year 313 A.D., the altars were large and immovable. They were variously positioned in each church. Sometimes the altar stood in the apse, in front of the Bishop's throne, sometimes in the middle of the nave (St. Peter's in Rome), sometimes at the head of the nave (St. Paul Outside the Walls, and St. John Lateran). No steps led up to the altar in the beginning; it stood directly on the pavement, which might itself be elevated. The altar at

-15-
this time had no front or back. The celebrant faced the congregation,
or he could use the other side of the altar with his back to the congre-
gation.\textsuperscript{25}

During the sixth or seventh centuries the celebrant began defi-
nitely to turn his back on the congregation at all times when he prayed.
The motive may have been to face the east when he prayed as the people
had supposedly been doing from the beginning.\textsuperscript{26} (The author cannot see
how it is possible for all the people who surrounded the altar in the very
beginning always to face toward the east. Also, the fact that one can
find churches in Rome and nearby vicinity that are very ancient that
have not been built with this end in mind permits one to be suspicious.)

Without a doubt, at some place along the line of history the
celebrant did begin turning away from the people. This fact had a very
large factor to play in cutting off the faithful from the direct partici-
pation in the liturgy. Probably, too, it was the main consideration that
ultimately brought about the silent recitation of the Canon of the Mass
(the very center of the liturgical prayers for the sacrifice) which was
recited in a loud voice until the eighth or the ninth centuries.\textsuperscript{27}
CHAPTER IV

THE ALTAR SINCE THE NINTH CENTURY

Until the ninth century all was kept off the altar except the "Oblata," the Sacramentary (book of ceremonies) and the Gospel Book. But about the close of the ninth century and the beginning of the tenth the small cube-shaped, free-standing altar was elongated and widened so that it might serve as the base of great shrines. The cult of the saints was blossoming in the Church at this time and large coffers which contained the relics of saints (many times their whole bodies) were placed upon the altar in view of the faithful. The bodies of the saints which till now had rested beneath the altars were placed above and behind them with the bases of the great reliquaries resting upon the tops of the altars. Many things were added to enhance the dignity of the relics with the result that enormous super-structures were built which dwarfed the altars into small proportions. The altar lost its prominence and the autonomy it once possessed. The retable began as an accessory to the altar but as it developed it destroyed the symbolism of the altar or so obscured it that it was all but lost. 28

The symbolism of the altar as Christ and as the place of supreme worship was further jeopardized when the altar was placed against the wall. It appeared even more in this position as the base of the super-structures that developed during the Renaissance and Baroque eras. The
Figure 17. An altar in St. Alexius Church in Rome showing how the altar was sometimes built over a tomb in the middle ages. (This is not a tomb it is mere decoration.)

Figure 18. An altar in a crypt of St. Praxedes Church in Rome. It is richly covered with mosaics. Note that there is no real definite symbol on the front.
altar all but lost itself under the monumental apotheosis of the saint or the mystery to which the church was dedicated.  

The sixteenth century saw a further addition which complicated the altar still more. At this time gradines or steps were introduced on the altar table to give space for the addition of flower pots, extra candlesticks, and other objects. At this time also the tabernacle was placed upon the altar. Up to this time it had either hung over the altar or it had its special place in the sanctuary. The tabernacles added to the altars were often enormous structures which drew more attention away from the altar.

Additions to the altar continued throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries until the original idea of an altar was even more lost. What had been considered accidental was now looked upon as essential. It must be stated that the altar-piece or reredos could be works of art and often in the earlier centuries were considered as such. Those which were manufactured enmasse in the last century did not even possess this merit. They were nothing but dull, uninspiring, and uninteresting imitations parading in sham splendor.

The tabernacle upon the altar brought about a change of attitude of the people towards the altar. The original purpose of the altar as a table of sacrifice receded into the background and the altar became almost exclusively a place where the Blessed Sacrament was reserved. The tabernacle became the important part of the altar.

During the nineteenth century exposition of the Blessed Sacrament was a most popular devotion and service. Niches or canopies were erected over the tabernacles so that the altar became a kind of permanent throne.
Figure 19. A very simple but effective treatment of the altar as a table with double supports. This altar is in the Divine Word Seminary at Soesterberg, Holland.

Figure 20. A simple altar with a tabernacle in the convent chapel at the Holy Spirit Parish in Padova, Italy. (Note that the above two altars also have no symbols on them.)
Figure 21. An altar in the chapel of Our Lady of Sorrows in the Basilica of Montecassino, Italy. It is an excellent example of how an altar can be lost in rich decorations.
of exposition; almost as if it had been primarily for this purpose, instead of the sacrifice of the Mass.\textsuperscript{31}

The altar had thus gradually lost its uniqueness and even much of the reverence formerly associated with it. The eyes of the faithful were transferred to the relics of the saints, or to the pictures or statues in the alterpiece or to the tabernacle and exposition throne. It is also significant that a decline in the appreciation for the Sacrifice itself which the altar represented and symbolized and which it should have kept before the minds of the faithful took place.

In recent years there has been a well noticed trend toward freeing the altar from its distracting surroundings and to place it once more in the simple setting it was meant to have. The growing appreciation of the symbol it was always meant to stand for has inspired many to tear everything away from the altar and let it stand by itself again. This does not mean that there is only one form of the altar. Innumerable forms could be thought of, each rich in symbolism. But the altar as the symbol of Christ and the people should always be kept clearly in mind. The altar is its own proper and beautiful symbol of man's relationship to God; nothing should be more useless than anything which is added to destroy this most excellent of symbols.
An altar is an official place to offer sacrifice. It has become a rather undertermined structure through the course of time. It is believed that an altar in the beginning was the top of a mountain. It was the tope of a mountain that was supposed to be the place nearest in contact with the divinity. Man has found it a matter of necessity to offer sacrifice to a Supreme Being from the very beginning; he wished to acknowledge that he is not an independent being but is responsible to a power far superior to himself. In this way man has found that he expresses himself to his fullest capabilities.

According to the Webster Dictionary, the word "sacrifice" is defined: "an offering to a deity of animal or vegetable life or of food, drink, incense or the like." In the second meaning it states that it is "anything consecrated and offered to God or to a divinity." A sacrifice is further defined in the Encyclopedia as: "the ritual destruction of an object or more commonly, the slaughter of a victim by effusion of blood, suffocation, fire, or other means."

From these definitions it could be concluded that there must be a victim - "animal or vegetable life"; and there must be a kind of formal offering of one sort or another and then a destruction of the offering - "consecrated and offered" and "ritual destruction". However, the purpose of the sacrifice according to its primary aim is not too clearly put.
Figure 22. A marble altar, simple and effective, in the crypt at the Tertiate of the Divine Word Missionaries in Nemi, Italy

Figure 23. Another altar in the same crypt as the above altar. This altar in the form of a shelf.
True, it is offered to "God;" but it is not stated why it is offered to "God". The real purpose of sacrifice is to show man's dependence upon God. It should, though, be stated that man can never offer anything to God in the sense that He needs anything more; that man can give something that God does not have.

Upon looking into the Old Testament of the Bible, which is reliable as a historical work as it is reliable as a religious source, one finds that from the very beginning man offered sacrifice to God. Even Adam and Eve, placed in the Garden of Paradise, were to show their dependence upon God Who created them. (They were in a sense to make or offer a sacrifice of their intelligence and freedom.) "You may eat your fill of all the trees in the garden," God told them, "except the tree which brings knowledge of good and evil; if ever you eat of this, your doom is death." (Genesis, 2,16-17.)

Man was brought to a test. He was to prefer what God wanted above his own wants; man was to show by his obedience to this simple command that he placed God's knowledge above his own; he was to sacrifice his own intelligence upon the "altar" of obedience to the will of God. Man failed.

According to the Bible, God gave man another chance to make good his failure. God would permit man to continue to live but his life was to become one big sacrifice fulfilling the prediction made by God that man would die. Although man must carry out the lot he acquired for himself, God came to the rescue and promised that one day God Himself would "remake" the world that man had destroyed by his disobedience. But until that time man's life must be burnt out in the world struggling to make amends in his own little way for that one moment of disobedience; that one moment in which man had failed to make a simple sacrifice of himself.
Every offering in the Old Testament was a self-offering of man to God represented in the burning of bulls and goats upon the altar. But from the Christian standpoint, these sacrifices were ineffectual shadows of the only offering which can restore human nature to its proper union with God.33

God is the author of life and because of this fact He can likewise take this life away from man. However, the life that a person has, since it is a gift and does not belong to him, cannot be taken by himself. A person's life is not his own; he cannot do with it as he wills. He is not responsible for his own life in the sense that he has any power over his own life. Man can in a sense by manner of a kind of symbolism take the gift that he has and offer it back to God. Man can do this by offering not to use an object upon which his life may depend or by offering up something that a person may want very strongly to show that one only wants the highest good, God Himself.34

It can be easily concluded that human sacrifices are completely wrong. If a man has no power over his own life, certainly he has nothing to say about whether another man should live or not. There is no proof, either, that human sacrifices were ever practiced by very primitive peoples. The most ancient sacrifices that have been noted have always been in the line of food stuffs, either vegetable or animal. The stories of human sacrifices of the Pawnees of North America and the Aztecs of Mexico would seem to be recent developments, corruptions of ancient beliefs.35

Throughout the Old Testament the Israelites were forbidden to take the lives of their children to make sacrifices to a false god.

And the Lord spoke to Moses, giving him this message for the sons of Israel: If any Israelite, or alien living among you, sacrifice a child of his to the false god Moloch, his life
Figure 24. Another altar at the Tertiate at Nemi. It is also in the crypt. It is a sculptured altar in marble.

Figure 25. Also this altar is in the crypt at Nemi. It is easy to observe the "portable altar" in the marble top.
must pay for it; he must be stoned publicly. On such a man my ban rests, and I will not let him live among my people any longer, once he has outraged my sanctuary, dragged my holy name in the dust, by sacrificing his child to Moloch. (Lechiticus 20, 2-4.)

A sacrifice was an important act of worship from the very first. There is the story of Cain and Abel. They both offered a sacrifice to God. Abel offered the very best of his flock and his sacrifice was somehow visibly accepted. Cain also offered a sacrifice but his was not pleasing to God. Cain became angry with his brother Abel and killed him. (Hebrews, 11,4; Genesis, 4,4-8.) It might be possible to explain the situation somewhat by the words of the Prophet Malachias. It is possible that the gifts of the sacrifice were very different by reason of the interior disposition and the care each bestowed upon his gift.

Ask you what care was lacking, when the bread you offer at my altar is defiled, ask you what despite you have done me, when you hold the Lord's table a thing of little moment? What, no harm done, when victim you offer in sacrifice is blind? No harm done, when it is lame or diseased? Pray you, says the Lord of hosts, make such a gift to the governor yonder, will he be content? Will he make favorites of you?

(Malachias 1, 7-8.)

A sacrifice is an external act of worship and gets its value from the dignity and interior disposition of the person who offers it. The value of the gift presented as a sacrifice also contributes much to make the sacrifice more acceptable to God, but in the words of Christ a very small offering can count for very much, depending upon the circumstances.

Presently there came a poor widow who dropped in two tiny coins, together worth a farthing. He called his disciples to him. "I tell you this," he said, "this widow has given more than any of the others; for those others who have given had more than enough, but she, with less than enough, has given all that she had to live on." (Mark 12, 42-44.)

The whole spirit of sacrifice can be nicely summed up in St. Augustine's words about the realtionship of the soul with God: 37
Figure 26. A newly constructed altar at the first seminary of the Divine Word Missionaries in Steyl, Holland. This altar is in a redecorated chapel for the priests of the seminary.

Figure 27. The main altar in the parish church taken care of by the Divine Word Missionaries in Munich, Germany. Note in the picture here and the previous one that the candlesticks are placed on the floor.
Just as we must acknowledge that the human soul is not what God is, so it must be set down that nothing is nearer to God among all the things He has created than the human soul. Therefore, it is handed down in the Catholic Church through special divine guidance that no creature is to be worshipped by the soul (gladly do I use the very words in which these truths were taught me), but that He alone is to be worshipped Who is the Creator of all things that are, "from Whom, by Whom, unto Whom" are all things, that is the unchanging Source, unchanging Wisdom, unchanging Love, One True and Perfect God, who never was not, never will not be; never was other, never will be other; than Who nothing is more hidden, nothing more present; with difficulty we find where He is, with greater difficulty, where He is not; with Whom all cannot be, without Whom no one can be. And if we human beings can with propriety predicate anything more wonderful of Him, in keeping with His nature, that we attribute to Him. Hence only God is to be adored by the soul, without discrimination or confusion. For, whatever the soul adores as God, it must deem more excellent than itself, and it is impossible to believe that the earth is superior to the nature of the soul, or the stars, or moon, or sun, or anything at all that is touched or seen by these eyes. Rather, reason proves with certainty that a single soul is of far greater value than all these material things, if only lovers of the truth will dare to pursue with unfaltering and respectful steps the path the soul points out, a path that is hard because it lies beyond the well-worn road of common experience.

The sacrifice of the Mass is the greatest act of worship that is possible. This is because of the infinite worth of the victim, which is Christ Himself. The Second Person of the Blessed Trinity became man, took a human nature just for the very purpose that He might be able to offer Himself for a sacrifice to God for all men and for all times. Christ being God had the power to lay down his life and to take it up again according to His own words. (Mark 9, 31-32.) God, Who was offended by that first act of disobedience, could only be placated by a being as great as Himself—God alone could satisfy Himself for the infinite offense against Himself—God in the nature of man, Christ, could make the sacrifice of appeasement.

Christ's sacrifice of His life upon the cross was the only real sacrifice to God for all times. This supreme act of worship will never able to be improved upon since it was the infinite act of God Him-
Figure 28. An altar made from a native drum of New Guinea. This altar is in the Anthropos Institute chapel at St. Augustine, Germany.

Figure 29. A tabernacle in the same chapel as the above altar. It is simply made from a log with some interesting crystals filled in the knot hole.
self giving fitting worship for mankind to Himself. Every sacrifice that has ever been effective in the past or will be effective in the future must in some way have a share in this greatest sacrifice, the sacrifice of Christ upon the cross. Because of this point the altar finds its tremendous importance, and will continue to be the very center of every true worship of God. It is upon the altar that this greatest of mysteries, Christ's death, is renewed again and again in an unbloody manner till the end of time. God will no longer be pleased with any sacrifice that is not, so to speak, dipped into the blood of that one great act of sacrifice upon the cross. The Prophet Malachias relates the words of God as saying that He will find no pleasure in any sacrifice anymore except the one that would be offered from the rising to the setting sun. (Malachias 1, 11.)
CHAPTER VI

THE THESIS ALTAR

The thesis had been settled upon and approved. It was agreed to construct an altar, together with a bit of research into the use of wood in altar construction through the centuries. It was only a question after this of getting the project under way as soon as possible.

An altar has some requirements that must be met to make it practical. There was question of the size of the altar. This would be decided by the rubrics of the present day. It would be mainly a problem of figuring out where this altar would be used. Certainly the tripon altars of the first centuries would not be adequate for the present day use. According to present day considerations, an altar should hardly be smaller than four feet long. There would seem to be no limit as to the length an altar might be. It would, however, seem in keeping with good design that it should fit gracefully into the whole structure into which it is placed. The convenience of the liturgy should also be a consideration in determining the size of the table top. A very good general size for an altar top would seem to be about six feet long and two feet wide.

All the ceremonies at the altar are conducted in a standing position and accordingly an altar should be of a standard height. A standard is usually given to be between forty and forty-two inches high. (The author has had occasion to celebrate the Holy Sacrifice in a few places in Italy. The altars go to extremes. A couple of times the altar must
The single pedestal altar which the author saw but did care for. From the idea of this altar began the double-pedestal-altar idea. This altar is in the Generalate of the Divine Word Missionaries at Nemi, Italy.

A picture of a sketching of the triple-support-altar which is described lightly in the work.
have been close to forty-five inches high, and on one other occasion it was as low as thirty-five inches. Each altar was very uncomfortable to use.) But here, also, convenience should be a deciding factor. Certainly a priest only five feet tall might find it very difficult to use an altar which comes up to standard measurements. A priest taller than six feet might find that an altar of standard height is a little too low.

The rubrics of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass calls for several genuflections to be made by the priest while celebrating the Mysteries. In order to genuflect correctly it is important that nothing get in the way of the left knee. The left knee extends out in front of the body during the genuflection. In order to make this action convenient it is important that the altar top extend over the supporting pedestals. At least in the center where the genuflections are most commonly performed there should be nothing to interfere with the act of genuflecting. If provisions for genuflecting are taken care of there will automatically be sufficient toe room and no special consideration need be given to this item.

The altar of today must be specially consecrated by a bishop. Only altars of marble are permitted to be consecrated. Since there are so many wooden altars, there may be some doubt in one's mind about this regulation. Even in a wooden altar, which strictly speaking is no altar at all, a marble slab must be inserted in the top upon which the Holy Sacrifice can be offered. The wooden portion becomes a means to hold the real altar at the proper height for the liturgical service. This kind of altar is termed a "portable altar" since the slab can be changed from one wooden structure to another. Even marble altars in many of the churches of today have no higher rating than a wooden altar since they, too, are only structures into which a "portable altar" is placed. A
permanent altar is one which is totally consecrated; the whole altar top is the altar. These are not nearly as common as portable altars. Permanent altars are usually only in very large churches and basilicas, and even then generally only the main altar of the church passes for a permanent altar.

The sizes of the portable altars (the small consecrated marble slab) vary. The most common size would be about one foot square. They can be as small as six inches square (large enough so that the majority of the base of the chalice and the greater portion of the host rest on the stone). In every altar stone is a small compartment into which are placed the relics of two or three saints (one of the relics usually of a martyr), and a document of consecration and the compartment is sealed by the bishop at the time he consecrates it by cement specially blessed for this ceremony.

The altar which the author proposed to build was to be used from either side. It was to be of wood; it would be forty inches high; and the design effected would give ample room for genuflecting. An altar stone would be placed within the top surface when it is used. The celebrant could either face the congregation or he could celebrate the Mass with his back toward the people. The chapel in which this altar would be placed has not been built yet but it would be a circular chapel; the congregation could gather around the altar from any side. The altar would be placed in the center of this chapel. With this consideration it became necessary to consider an altar with two sides as the front. (Upon further consideration, it might have been better to make the altar square with four front sides or to have considered a round altar.)
Figure 32. The pedestals for the thesis altar. Showing the Alpha and the Omega carved in the circle.

Figure 33. The two pedestals for the thesis altar showing the same sides with the Omegas carved in the surfaces. The opposite sides have Alphas on them.
The altar was designed to be placed in a chapel of the Divine Word Seminary at Bordentown, New Jersey. The chapel has not as yet been constructed. Just where this altar will eventually be used is difficult to say.

When work began on the designing of the thesis altar, much of the tradition of the past few centuries could not be excluded from the mind of the author. Being a child of the times, it was not completely out of scope to enjoy seeing altars with the myriad of details which went into their makeup. Just how much to do away with and how much to include into the design became a great problem. How simple and how symbolical should an altar be?

The simple table idea of an altar was farthest removed from the mind of the author. To tear anything away from the traditional altar at first seemed even like a sacrilege, and above all there must be a symbol on every altar. What could have been further removed from the real fact of the altar than these considerations?

Ideas eventually began to come and the first thought of an altar which gripped the author was an altar with a single pedestal of moderate dimensions to hold up the "mensa" (table top). The idea grew and grew until the author had occasion to see a picture of an altar, not exactly the exemplar of the author's idea but close enough to cause a rejection of the first idea in favor of something that looked a little more balanced. To the author, the single-pedestal-altar as presented in the picture appeared to be unbalanced.

The single-pedestal-altar idea began to give way to one with two pedestals. And these two pedestals began to get involved as time went on. The two supports for the table top would look like upturned stumps, with the roots spreading underneath the table to support it. The author
toyed around with this idea for a couple of months. It seemed that this would be the type of altar that would be made.

The idea of incorporating symbols into the plans began to take hold of the author about the beginning of the summer term. The ideas of the altar were becoming still more complicated instead of simpler. With a thought of the Trinity of the Three Divine Persons in God, the idea of two bases to support the top gave way to triple supports. It would be possible to support the top with three irregularly shaped bodies. These bodies would be supported from the floor by "legs" growing out of these chunks of wood. Upward "arms" would extend to hold up the top. The "legs" and "arms" would be tapered and extending so as to fill up the space under the table top. This idea was drawn up in full scale and it did look good. It was even agreed to construct this altar. However, when some of the techniques that would be employed in making this altar were considered and experimented with, it was decided that it would take too long to construct this design and it was given up. So back to the panning stage.

As time went on it was believed even more strongly that the altar should be simple. To work symbols into the construction would seem to get away from the real idea of an altar. An altar needed nothing on it to point out what it was or was for. The author's thoughts were prejudiced by the time in which he lived and it was difficult to break completely and all at once with the immediate past. The conviction for this line of thought would not come through too clearly. Search was continually made through material in quest of ideas for a new plan of the altar to be. Many plans were thought of and as many discarded. It was interesting to find out that many of the altars that the author came across in his search had no symbols on them. It would be safe to state,
the author believes, that at least sixty-five percent of all the altars
that were seen and studied had no symbols on them. They did not even have
one simple cross.

Just what to do began to be a real problem. The author talked
the situation over with one of the instructors and it was suggested that
maybe a kind of solid base might be the solution. The time element began
also to become a factor in determining what the altar would be. The altar
had to be finished during the summer term.

After further discussion the suggestion was made that possibly
some symbol worked into the solid base might look good. The instructor
mentioned that he had once seen an altar supported on an elliptical base.
The base had reminded him of a fish. With the word "fish" some ideas
once discarded were activated again. This line of thought had excellent
possibilities and immediately new plans were considered. What the in-
structor had said about the elliptical base at once suggested two ellip-
tical pedestals. They could be positioned so as to leave a space between
them. Some sort of emblem could be carved into the surfaces of these
bases. No thought was given at first to the techniques that might be
involved in constructing these bases.

It did not take long to draw up these supports in full size and
figure just how much of an arch would be suitable. From the drawing it
was figured that eight pieces five inches wide would be necessary for
each elliptical surface. If these pieces would be angled at five degrees
the desired arch would be formed. The fears that were present at the be-
ginning of the procedure as to how the pieces might be glued together
proved to be groundless when all the construction was finished. The only
real problem was in gluing together the final two sections. The diffi-
Figure 34. The Thesis Altar with the supports in place.

Figure 35. One of the pedestals lying down to show the construction of the elliptical shape.
ulty came from the clamping problem. Everything eventually worked out fine and well.

Before beginning construction there was a problem of selecting the kind of wood to be used. Rosewood was the first consideration since the altar was to have the very best. It would be too difficult to get the amount needed in time to finish the work so it was decided that the next best wood, black walnut, would be used.

Work on the table top went along with the work on the bases. The top measured six feet long and forty inches wide. Because of its size it was a time consuming job to get all the wood dressed up for gluing and it was an even harder job to get the surface flat and level and of a uniform thickness. When it was flat, one of the instructors suggested that it could be taken to Morse Lumber Company and have the top sanded on their large surface sanding machine. This advice was well heeded for it saved days of hard and time-consuming hand sanding.

The table was made to appear thicker than it was by the addition of strips along the sides with the grain and also along the end grain. It was feared that a piece added along the end grain might cause the top to warp. (The author has had some experience with such construction previously. Much warpage was the result.) It was suggested that by adding blocks along the ends on the underside with the grain in the blocks' running in the same direction as the grain in the top, the warping problem might be overcome. In spite of precautions taken, the top warped and it became an item then of trying to do something to take out the warp. Heavy angle iron strips were screwed to each end hoping, with a little doubt, that the warp would be taken out completely. When the braces were in position it was noted that the warp was diminished but not gone completely. The warp caused the angle iron strips to bend a little, thus
Figure 36. The candlesticks displayed on the altar top. They are not in their normal position on the altar for services.

Figure 37. Two of the candlesticks showing the construction of the top and the bottom in detail.
allowing a slight warp to remain. (On observing the top just in the last month it was found that the warp had completely disappeared.)

There yet remained the problem of what to carve into the elliptical surfaces of the bases. Since the altar would be used from either side, each side would receive the same treatment. What it was decided to put on one side of the altar would be likewise carved into the opposite side. The "Alpha" and the "Omega" seemed fitting symbols for the altar and any altar. In the book of the Apocalypse, St. John has Christ saying, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end." (Apocalypse 1,8; 22,13.) Since the altar is the symbol of Christ and Christ calls Himself the "Alpha and the Omega" what better emblem for an altar could be selected? When the letters were drawn to a considerable size and placed upon the surfaces with scotch tape there was something about them that did not fit. Possibly there was too much space remaining that would be plain. At any rate a new idea was tried, and several ideas in succession were tried with as little results. It was advised that the two hemispheres of the world might well fit the bases. Since the altar was designed to be used in a chapel for Missionaries, the two hemispheres of the world might be a good switch to a missionary motive. These, too, were drawn up and scotched to the altar pedestals but they did not have the desired effect because of the size. The smallest details in the hemispheres would not stand out too clearly. A section was carved out as it was to be on the base and it did not stand out as was desired. The circle idea of the hemispheres did look good on the bases and with a little further consideration it was suggested that the first symbols of the "Alpha" and the "Omega" might fit rather well within the circles. It was tried by scotch taping the drawing to the base and it looked appealing.
Work proceeded immediately on the carving and it came off with little trouble. One of the elliptical sides split because of being improperly glued. It was discovered that the two pieces had never really been joined due to a twist in one of the small five-inch pieces. The situation was remedied and work progressed as usual.
CHAPTER VII

THE CANDLESTICKS

According to the thesis proposal there remained one more item - the candlesticks. They were to be of a matching design. Just what the holder should look like was already decided by the altar design. It just took some time to find the correct shape and size. The adviser suggested that some shape similar to the bases or pedestals of the altar but on a smaller scale would be a good solution. It did seem to be a suitable suggestion. However, on second consideration, the shape that would have resulted would have been rather long from one tip of the elliptical candleholder to the other. The width of the holder would not have been very great and there would have been a problem of tipping. It was finally thought of making the candleholders triangular shaped. This would offer three corners to support the holder and the size could be cut down considerably without its being too precarious. The three sides of the triangular shaped sticks would be left plain but the end would be carved out to a depth of one and one-half inches and a hole drilled in the center to receive the candle.

A hole of one inch was drilled in the carved out end and sudden inspiration brought about the decision to turn the stick upside down and give the bottom the same treatment as the top. In this end a hole of larger size was bored. An inch and one-half hole was drilled in the opposite end, thus making the candleholders reversible. (See photo.)
The candleholders were only nine inches high, thus making it possible for them to be placed on the altar during the Mass and not hide the actions of the priest as he performs the rubrics.

(According to what the author observed through Italy and Germany the trend seems to be for placing the candleholders off the altar at the ends of the altar, standing on the floor.)
CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

The challenge that the construction of this altar held up was tremendous. The author considered the experience worth every effort that went into the project. The altar itself was a very worth-while achievement, but coupled as it was with the research that went with the work the true value can only with difficulty be measured. The thesis work has changed the author's prejudicial ideas about altars completely. He no longer cares to see any symbol on an altar. If the project were to be undertaken anew with the knowledge which the author acquired from study of ancient altars, the thesis altar would have been of a simpler design. Certainly there would have been no question of what symbols to place on the altar; there would be no symbols on it. By a study of the altars of the past and by observing many altars of the present in various countries, the author has developed a greater respect and appreciation of this all-important item of every church.

The author has had the opportunity of going abroad and of living for six months in Italy. This afforded ample opportunity of visiting many ancient churches and of observing and studying the altars in these churches. Most of the altars in the churches today have usually been rebuilt and hardly date back further than the fifteenth century. The most ancient altars, as has been stated can only be discovered in frescoes in the many catacombs about Rome. Even the altars now in the catacombs are of recent origin.
The altar project gave the author a feeling of real achievement. The research work gave a much greater appreciation of what an altar is and should be. The whole project has turned out to be much more profitable than it appeared at first it would be.
FOOTNOTES


8. Ibid., p. 166.


12. Figure 5.


14. A Croegaert, The Mass, Vol. 1. Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press 1958, p. 9; H. L. Pass, op. cit., p. 339. A number of passages of an incidental character in the writings of both Greek and Latin Fathers give the ultimate confirmation of this view. Optatus, Augustine and Athanasius all mention altars of wood. (See Optat., de Schism. Donatist. vi, i, where he says that the Donatists used the altars of the Catholics as firewood; also Aug. Ep., 185, par. 25, who states that the orthodox bishop Maximianus was beaten with the wood of the altar.)

15. Archdale A. King, op. cit., p. 84.

17. Ibid., p. 84. The Roman Pontifical is a book of liturgical services for a Bishop.


20. Ibid.


23. Arnoldus (July-August 1963) pp. 123-126. (Publication for the members of the Society of the Divine Word.) "Four of the ten crosses are usually traced with Chrism at the four corners where the altar slab is joined to the altar's base; in this case they were omitted, since the Nemi Altar is a monolith. The Sacred Congregation of Rites issued a special rescript authorizing the omission of the four crosses in the rite."


26. Ibid., p. 169. Christ is symbolized by the rising sun in the East. Therefore to face the east was to turn away from the night of paganism and to face the light of the Son of Justice. (Author's note); Nicholas Gihr, S.V.D., op. cit., p. 274.

27. Ibid., p. 169. The recitation of the Canon is not completely in silence for the direction or rubric for Mass directs that the voice should be audible to the celebrant and possibly to one standing very near. It would seem to be a type of soft whisper.

28. Ibid., p. 170; J. B. O'Connell, op. cit., p. 139.


31. Ibid., p. 171.


36. Hebrews, 11,4; Genesis, 4, 4-8.


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