

Assumptions about Art and Architecture in the Vatican's 1977 *Ordo Dedicationis Ecclesiae et Altaris*

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Introduction

The theme of the Societas Liturgica Congress this year, Liturgy and the Arts, applies to traditions of churches in many ways, but foundationally in the very building where people gather to worship. The Catholic Church recently revised its elaborate Order of the Dedication of a Church and an Altar, renewing ceremonies that developed especially from the ninth through the sixteenth centuries, with further refinements in 1961 on the eve of the Second Vatican Council. The revised dedication ceremonies, completed in 1977 within the first decade after the revised Roman Missal, make certain assumptions about art and architecture. The entire *Ordo Dedicationis Ecclesiae et Altaris* treats a variety of circumstances including the blessing of a portable altar and of a new chalice, but the most expressive ritual is the dedication of a church.

This paper will provide a brief overview of two ceremonies: The Order of Laying a Foundation Stone or the Commencement of Work on the Building of a Church, and The Order of the Dedication of a Church. It will explore ecclesiological themes, and then examine particular matters pertaining to art and architecture: The site and layout of the church, the altar, particular objects, and the use of music. Summary remarks will conclude.

An Overview of Two Ceremonies

The Order of Laying a Foundation Stone or the Commencement of Work on the Building of a Church convenes leaders and parishioners with their bishop or his delegate to set aside the area where construction is about to begin. The ceremony unfolds in four parts: The Approach to the Place Where the Church Is to Be Built, which encompasses a procession insofar as possible; the Reading of the Word of God, which includes one or more biblical passages and a homily; The Blessing of the Site of the New Church with prayer and optional psalmody if the bishop processes around the site with ministers; and the Blessing and Laying of the Foundation Stone if this particular construction includes one. Various prayers draw the ceremony to a close.

The Order of the Dedication of a Church also has four parts wrapped around and within the celebration of the Eucharist. The Introductory Rites include the entrance into the church, preferably with all processing from the outside,

although this is not always possible, and gathering inside where the bishop blesses and sprinkles water upon the people, the walls and the altar. The second part is the Liturgy of the Word, which always begins with the solemn presentation of the lectionary and the reading from Nehemiah 8 about the proclamation of the recently discovered word of God from a newly raised platform, around which people listen attentively. The third part is the most elaborate: the litany of supplication invokes the aid of the saints; the bishop encloses relics under the altar—if there are any; he offers the solemn prayer of dedication of the church and then anoints and incenses the altar and the walls. The altar is covered with cloths like a table, and the area surrounding it is adorned with flowers. Candles are lighted, and the fourth part begins, the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Near the end, if there is a Blessed Sacrament chapel, the bishop inaugurates it by placing what remains of holy communion in the tabernacle there—or wherever the tabernacle is located when there is no separate chapel for it. The entire ceremony easily takes over two hours, which is still a considerable abridgment from the one described in earlier Roman Pontificals.

The Church and the Church

Happily the word in English for the building applies also to the people who gather there. The church assembles within a church. Although St. Paul's Greek did not allow the same play on words, he was still able to call the people who read his First Letter to the Corinthians God's building (3:9). The revised ceremonies continually explore this theme.

For example, in the opening rites over the building site, the former pontificals had the bishop and ministers exorcize the ground. The faithful had no role and were probably not even invited to attend. Now the presence of the people essentially interprets the rite, which has shifted from an almost manichaean concern about the evil property of matter such as soil to the presence of Christ in the gathered People of God.

The theme of church and church is heard in the most characteristic texts of the dedication ceremony: the prayer of dedication and the preface of the eucharistic prayer.

The Site and Layout

In both of these ceremonies, the Commencement of Work and the Dedication of the Church, documents pertaining to architecture play a key role. In the Commencement of Work, one rubric (ODCA I:23) says this:

After the Homily, according to local custom, a document recording the blessing of the foundation stone and the beginning of the building of the church may be read; it is to be signed by the Bishop and by representatives of those who are to work on the building of the church, and together with the foundation stone, is to be enclosed in the foundations.

Although this rubric does not explicitly call for a time capsule, nor does it invite the enclosure of other objects, which participants may do anyway, it shows

rather the significance of permanently recording some details of construction inside the foundation of the new church.

More expressively, when the church is dedicated, another rubric (ODCA II:33) describes this ceremony at the threshold before anyone enters:

Representatives of those who have been involved in the building of the church (the faithful of the parish or of the diocese, donors, architects, workers) hand over the building to the Bishop, offering him, according to place and circumstances, either the legal documents for possession of the building, or the keys, or the plan of the building, or the book in which the course of the work is described and in which the names of those in charge of it and of the workers are recorded. One of the representatives briefly addresses the Bishop and the community, illustrating, if need be, what the new church expresses in its art and in its own special design. Then the Bishop calls upon the Priest to whom the pastoral office of the church has been entrusted to open the door of the church.

These actions are new to the history of this rite in the Catholic Church, and they graciously show the importance of the people who designed and constructed the building, artists and architects alike. This action also assumes that they have given considerable thought to the design, and that their explanation of it forms part of the process of dedication.

This brief ceremony makes a further archeological assumption about a new church: Ideally it will sit on property large enough for people to gather outside. Several liturgical ceremonies make the outside space as critical for proper celebration as the inside space: The Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens, when those seeking formation for baptism ceremonially pass through the door; Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord, when a procession outdoors crosses the threshold to the church as if entering Jerusalem; and the Easter Vigil, when the entire community gathers by a lighted fire outdoors and gains entrance by following the paschal candle, a pillar of fire like the one that once led the way toward the Promised Land. Therefore, the first opening of the door is a moment of great importance.

Previous iterations of this ceremony involved other elaborations. In the twelfth century Roman Pontifical, for example, a deacon previously stationed inside the church shouted a verse of Psalm 24 to the bishop outside, who responded in a similar way. As the choir sang Jesus' invitation to Zacchaeus to hurry down from the tree, the deacon opened the door to admit the bishop. In another ceremony, when processing through the interior to bless it, the bishop stopped to address the building's inanimate point of entry with these words: "Door, be consecrated and entrusted to the Lord God; door, be the gateway of peace, through him who called himself the gate, Jesus Christ our Lord" (Giampietro p. 306, n. 1077).

The layout of the church is marked by certain important furnishings, such as the presider's chair, the ambo for the proclamation of the word, and the tabernacle, the place of reposition for the Blessed Sacrament, the consecrated

hosts remaining after Mass. All these are appointed for their duty simply by their usage within the order of dedication, rather than by any particular prayer of blessing. The presider's chair, for example, is so designated when the bishop sits in it for the first time (ODCA II:35). The ambo is set aside for sacred purposes when the first proclamation of scripture takes place (ODCA II:54). The Blessed Sacrament chapel is not blessed, but inaugurated as the remaining communion breads are placed there for the first time and the sanctuary lamp is lighted (ODCA II:81). The attention given to such a chapel suggests that a space dedicated for devotional prayer deserves a room independent from the communal prayer in the main church. The architectural separation of the tabernacle from the sanctuary thus provides greater clarity concerning its purpose.

The Altar

The altar of sacrifice serves also as the table of communion, and its design and placement are significant. The introduction to the Order of Dedication cites the Roman Missal, "Hence the general arrangement of the sacred building must be such that in some way it conveys the image of the assembled congregation and allows the appropriate ordering of all the participants, as well as facilitating each in the proper carrying out of his [or her] function" (ODCA II:3). In the chapter on dedicating an altar, the rite explicitly states, "The altar should be built separate from the wall, in such a way that the Priest can easily walk around it and celebrate Mass facing the people. 'The altar should occupy a place where it is truly the center to which the attention of the whole congregation of the faithful naturally turns'" (ODCA IV:8, citing GIRM 299). Thus, the artistic design of the altar and its placement within the church show that the altar belongs to all the people, not to the priest alone. It is their altar of sacrifice and their table of communion. Similarly, when candles are placed upon the altar as they are for the first time in this ceremony, they are not to block the view of the faithful (GIRM 307). The art and architecture of the church also assume that all the people participate at this altar.

The inclusion of relics of saints is optional, though the tradition can be traced to Saint Ambrose and aims to recall Revelation 6:9, where John sees beneath the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for bearing witness to God. In the artistic design of altars, a place for relics is similarly prepared underneath. Relics do not rest on top of the table, nor are they embedded within that mensa. Many Catholics think that the priest and deacon kiss the altar at the beginning and end of Mass to honor the relics of saints, but that is not true. The altar is a symbol of Christ. The altar does not belong to any saint; it belongs to God.

The anointing of the altar shows that it represents Christ, the anointed one. The anointing of the walls of the church represents the anointing of the People of God, the body of Christ who make up the church, and who carry the gospel visibly into the world. The very architectural height of church buildings assumes the evangelical nature of the People of God. All these anointings rely on the passage from Genesis 28:18 where Jacob anointed a memorial stone after his vision of a stairway joining heaven to earth.

Objects

Several other objects of artistic design are important to the dedication ceremonies. For example, at the commencement of construction, a wooden cross marks the place where the altar will one day rest. The Catholic liturgy draws a strong parallel between the cross and the altar, in which the former interprets the latter, and both are incensed at the preparation of the gifts in the Liturgy of the Eucharist. This cross is to be made of wood, which seems logical as a way of representing the cross of Christ, but which also conceals a historical note: Ever since the Pontifical of Durandus in the thirteenth century, this ceremony has called for a wooden cross to mark the site of the future altar. This centuries-old tradition continues today.

Crosses also adorn the walls of the church, and these deserve artistic attention. They ever mark the places where the walls were once anointed with chrism, and where the dedication candles may burn on significant days. Twelve crosses retain the oldest tradition, but four are permitted to signify that the church is an image of the holy city of Jerusalem (ODCA II:16a), with its twelve gates seen by John in Revelation 21:12-14, three facing each of the four directions.

The foundation stone that may be set at the beginning of construction itself serves as an image of Christ. Ephesians 2:20 calls him the cornerstone or capstone. The stones should evoke the foundation of a city, the new Jerusalem mentioned in Hebrews 12:22 and Revelation 21:2. The blessing of the stone includes a reference to Daniel 2:34, concerning a stone hewn without human hands. Christian tradition interpreted that as a prophecy for the virginal conception of Jesus. Whoever designs the foundation stone should remember that it represents Christ.

The altar is covered with a cloth and surrounded by flowers. This helps designate it as the communion table as well. When the candles are lighted, the bishop tells the deacon, “Let the light of Christ shine brightly in the church, that all nations may attain the fullness of truth.” The altar, then, is also the source of the people’s duty to evangelize.

Music

Another expression of art in the dedication ceremony is its use of music. Out of concern for the full, conscious, active participation of the people, the revised order of service removed one piece of chant that it thought too difficult, the responsory “*Induit te Dominus*,” or “The Lord has clothed you,” which accompanied the Canticle of Tobit in the lighting of candles. However, the revision left in place the eloquent chant for the incensation of the altar and the church, “*Stetit angelus*,” which draws from Revelation 8:3 and 4, about the clouds of incense rising from the golden censer in the hand of the angel standing near the altar. The chant features a melisma of thirty-eight notes on a single syllable of the Latin word *ascendit*, and twenty-five notes on a single syllable of the concluding “alleluia” (ODCA II:68). The music aurally paints the airy rise of the smoke.

At communion time the text for the recommended antiphon invites musical artistry to show the connection between the communion table in church and the common table at home. Psalm 128 forms the main content for the communion music, with its view that children seated around a table are a sign of blessing. The recommended antiphon interprets that verse: “Like shoots of the olive, may the children of the Church be gathered around the table of the Lord.” The communion music therefore draws attention once again to the church gathered at the church.

Conclusion

The revised Order of Dedication has updated the rituals to show a shift in theology about the ceremony, making it more expressive of the People of God gathering in the building that represents Christ, themselves, their mission, and their future. With careful attention to art, architecture, objects and music, the new church will display its meaning among the people who attend its dedication and worship there for generations to come.