

## What the Fathers of the Church taught about altars

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Most Reverend Fathers, Most Gentle Ladies, Most Illustrious Gentlemen,

I address you with great joy, even if, with a certain affectionate fear, I speak before such men, to say a few things about our subject under discussion in this assembly, in the light of Patrology. In other words, I shall propose to you some points from the monuments of the Fathers which may be of use to us, so that we may look more deeply into the reasons for explaining the force and importance of the altar—or rather, the altars—among those venerable masters.

1. First of all, we must note this: Christian Latin, and particularly liturgical Latin, abandoned one term and chose the other. The reason for this is more easily understood: for the word 'ara' seemed too closely associated with the rites of the pagans. The words 'altare' or 'altaria', however, were used less frequently by the ancients, so that this term was suitable for expressing the new sacred things of the Christians. For learned men who, in the late ninth century, devoted themselves to tracing the Christian Latin language, have shown with certain and indeed copious arguments that Christians writing about sacred matters were very keen to distinguish their vocabulary from that used by pagan writers. From which we can understand what the Fathers felt: that Christian worship is peculiar and must not be made similar to other cults; that is to say, the sacraments by which Christians worship must be kept and protected from any form of syncretism.
2. If one then investigates the etymological reason, one can agree with the scholars who associate the word *\*altare\** with the verb "to burn", which is to burn victims destined for the heavens with fire. This is confirmed by testimonies already provided by pagan authors, such as Lucretius, Virgil, Tacitus and others. Christians, therefore, having adopted the word 'altar' in place of 'ara', acknowledged it to be a sacred thing where the sacrifice is consummated by the fire of the Holy Spirit, sent down from Heaven, so that the Eucharistic species, consecrated as the flesh and blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ, might be offered. To understand this, one should read John Chrysostom, who writes in his work entitled *'On the Priesthood'*.

For the priest does not carry a fire, but pours out prayers for a long time, not that a torch, kindled from heaven, may consume, but that grace, descending upon the sacrifice, may make it shine more splendidly, like silver purified by fire. Who then, unless he were utterly mad or possessed, could despise this most terrible mystery? (Book III)

The most certain doctrine concerning the Holy Mass is illustrated by the Fathers: a sacrifice is offered upon the altars, and the Mass cannot be understood, as some say, in the same way as a banquet for brothers or friends.

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Therefore, Chrysostom advises that Christians should surround the altars with awe and a grateful heart, for by virtue of the sacrifice offered upon them, they are to be considered always venerable and always worthy of veneration. Furthermore, from Chrysostom's testimony, we learn that the sacred ministers in particular fulfil their office at the altars, and their mystical life is nourished by their proximity to the altars, which are to be regarded as the principal places of the Christian priesthood.

3. The same image of fire, which is connected with the sacred rites performed upon the altar, is already found in Origen of Alexandria. Who, when commenting on the book of Leviticus, with admirable and singular eloquence, says that fire flows from the altars of the Lord which purifies sinners, as the Holy Scriptures repeatedly relate. We read therefore in the commentaries of Origen.

"And he shall take," he says, "a firepan full of coals." Not all are purified by that fire, which is taken 'from the altar'. Aaron is purified by that fire, and Isaiah, and those who are like them; but we others, who are not such—among whom I count myself—shall be purified by another fire; I fear it is by that one of which it is written: "a river of fire ran before him". That 'fire' is not 'from the altar'. What is 'from the altar' is the fire, the fire of the Lord; [...] To Isaiah, however, his own fire is not brought, but the fire of the altar, which will 'purge his lips', and to him, of whom it is said: 'and he will take a coal of fire with tongs from the altar, which is before the Lord, and will fill his hands with incense of finely-ground frankincense'. Which our Lord indeed fulfilled more fully. For He 'filled His hands with fine incense', of which it is written: "let my prayer be directed as incense in Your sight". He therefore 'filled his hands' with holy works, which he accomplished for the human race. Why, then, is it called 'the incense of composition'? Because it is not one single kind of work, but is composed of justice and piety, of continence, of prudence, and of all such virtues, that which is pleasing to God (*Hom. Lev. IX,8*).

Various observations arise from the Origenian commentary. Firstly, the Holy Scriptures appear to be the principal sources for understanding the significance of the altars, and the Liturgy and the Scriptures cannot be separated from one another. Furthermore, in Origen's allegory, fire is to be interpreted more often as the uncreated divine grace, namely the Holy Spirit himself, and not as the created one, which are his gifts and operations in the souls of the faithful. In other words, from the altars of the Lord, the work of sanctification for humanity is generated. Finally, the altars are associated with incense and its sweet odours. Incense is not only a figure of pure prayer, as the Psalmist recites, but also, according to Origen, a symbol of the manifold virtues signified by the elements from which the sacred aromatics are derived. Therefore, the altars become, in accordance with this sequence of the reading, a place from which a sacred virtue embraces the souls of those who surround the altars, in order to compose the most honourable morals. What I have called altars, according to Origen, mould the minds to a virtuous life, and instruct in the best things for humankind, so that before the altars the offerings of the faithful life are formed, most pleasing to God. Nor should we overlook that Origen proposed a most Christological interpretation, in keeping with what is called the Christocentrism of the Fathers. The altars are always a visible sign

of Christ present in the performance of the sacraments and in the offering of the Mass. Therefore, due reverence must be shown.

4. Augustine, too, teaches us some things about altars. For those who peruse the letters of the Bishop of Hippo, it is fitting to relate what he said about the unity of the Church, which is signified by the faithful people who gather around the same altar. However, with a certain sadness, the Doctor of Grace warns the faithful not to be discordant in their daily affairs, only to then separate in the sacred rites, each seeking different altars.

Unity is forsaken, so that the husband may go here, the wife there: let him say, 'Keep your unity with me, for I am your husband'; let her answer, 'I will die where my father is': so that on one bed they may divide Christ, whom we detest if they divide a bed. Unity is forsaken, so that relatives, and citizens, and friends, and guests, and whosoever is bound to one another by human ties, both Christians, in entering into feasts, in giving and receiving marriages, in buying and selling, in covenants and agreements, in greetings, in consents, in conversations, in all their affairs and dealings are at one, but at God's altar are at discord. For those who, however it may have been conceived elsewhere, ought to end their discord there, and according to the Lord's precept, first be reconciled to their brethren, and then offer the gift of the altar, are at one elsewhere, but at odds there (108, 20).

If we delve deeper into the matter that Augustine addresses in this letter, we shall undoubtedly find that he condemned the practice of the Donatists who, puffed up with a certain pride, were tearing the communion in the Church to such an extent that the very Eucharistic table was defiled by the unworthy signs of an unworthy division. In other words, with Augustine, the movement proceeds from the right doctrine concerning the same Sacraments, which directs the faithful to the same altar, and the rule of faith cannot be separated from the rule of prayer, so that the rule of Christian living may be observed more faithfully and diligently. If we then comment more deeply on Augustine's thought, in this Epistle CVIII, we shall find the seeds of that doctrine which is more recently called Eucharistic Ecclesiology: The Church makes the Eucharist and the Eucharist makes the Church, whose intimate communion is fostered and advanced by the same altar.

5. Let us finally turn to Leo the Great, Pope of Rome. Among the Fathers of the Church, no one has illustrated the hierarchical nature of the Church more or better than this Bishop, nor, among the Latins, has anyone expounded the baptismal priesthood and its dignity. Therefore, the sacred ministers, in fulfilling their own office, minister at the visible altars, whilst the faithful offer up on the invisible altars of their hearts sacrifices of a pure conscience. The one assists the other. Those are the mediators for the lay faithful of the Grace that flows from the altars; these, by their prayers flowing from integrity and honesty, sustain the ministry of the priests. For this reason, in the words of Leo the Great, the altar appears as the most sacred place to which the minds of all are turned.

Let us therefore hear the weighty and eloquent word of Leo the Great, which is read in his Sermons.

For the sign of the cross makes kings of all who are regenerated in Christ, and the anointing of the Holy Spirit consecrates priests: so that, apart from this special service of our ministry, all spiritual and rational Christians may recognise that they are of the royal line and partakers of the priestly office. For what is more royal than for a subject of God to be the ruler of his own body? And what is more priestly than to vow to the Lord a pure conscience, and to offer immaculate sacrifices of piety from the altar of the heart? (*Serm. 4*)

How beautiful is that last expression: the altar of the heart! If the soul is quickened by the divine Grace that flows from the altars, it itself becomes an altar: this is the genuine, active participation in the sacraments that is commended.

Having said this, I conclude the little discourse in summary with a few sentences.

1. The Fathers of the Church propose certain principles for elucidating the theology of the altars, which can be defined as mystical: the entire life of Christians, and especially that of the sacred ministers, is nourished from the altars.
2. If the doctrine concerning the altar is misunderstood, the entire liturgical edifice will collapse, and the canons will not suffice to perform the sacred rites properly.
3. Sacred Scripture is offered to the faithful through the reading of the Fathers, so that if anyone wishes to investigate the matter of the altars, they should, as is fitting, draw on passages from Holy Scripture and must in no way omit to refer correctly to the opinions and words of the Fathers. I have spoken.