

The place of the altar in Eucharistic rites

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"For the mysteries of the Church are awesome, and the altar is truly awesome," says St. John Chrysostom in one of the rare passages in his works where he speaks of the holy liturgy: it is a subject which, for him as for all the Fathers, is so intimate that he does not speak of it directly but only in passing, in references and allusions that only the initiated will understand.² This *disciplina arcani* is a well-known obstacle to reading the Fathers, for their doctrine on the Mass and the Holy Sacrament is always well hidden; thus superficial minds have concluded that they did not have a well-established doctrine on the subject. However, a little research will show that the early Fathers were very aware of the importance of the Mass, but simply did not like to talk about it. All the texts that mention it, even the most ancient ones, teach that the Christian altar is, in itself, an object of respect and veneration, which should be kissed, incensed, anointed and adorned with fear and reverence. To desecrate an altar is a scandal and a crime, for the altar is not a mere support but something mysterious, full of hidden and symbolic meaning, something that participates in the majesty of God Himself, something even to be feared: *Tremendum vere mysteria Ecclesiae - horrendum vere altare*, as the Benedictine translation of this quotation from St. John Chrysostom says.

To understand why the altar is thus an object of fear, we must study the place it held in the liturgy of ancient times and seek out the various symbolic meanings given to it by the early doctors of the Church. We will see that the altar alone can signify several different things that are particularly relevant at different moments of the Mass. This doctrinal and spiritual richness has survived in the Roman rite until modern times. We can only admire this doctrinal richness—and shudder with indignation at all the altars that, through malice or ignorance, have been destroyed throughout the history of the Church.

What, then, is the altar? The *Rubricæ generales* of the Missal of Saint Pius V tell us that it must be "made of stone, consecrated by a bishop or by an abbot who has received the faculty from the Holy See, or at least of altar stone (*ara*), also consecrated by a bishop or abbot as indicated above, which will be embedded in it and will be large enough to receive the host and most of the chalice. For centuries, it has been essential for the altar to be made of stone, although this was not the case in the beginning, as Bishop Conlon will show. Chrysostom speaks of it in almost the same terms as the missal: "It is stone, and it is sanctified"³; and St. Thomas gives us a symbolic reason

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² SAINT JOHN CHRYSOSTOM: *Opera omnia*, ed. B. de Montfaucon, Paris 1718-1738, VII: *Hom. in Johan.* XLVI, p. 273d.

³ SAINT JOHN CHRYSOSTOM: *Hom. in Johan.* VIII, 433c.

for this: it represents Christ, the Rock (we will come back to this), and also a practical reason: stone is solid and easy to find⁴ .

Saint Gregory the Great introduces one of the essential themes of the rite of consecration: the altar represents Jacob's stone: "What does this altar represent, if not the stone that Jacob set up as a stele?" - *Quid vero in hoc altari, nisi ille lapis ostenditur, quem Patriarcha Jacob in titulum erexit?*⁵ This "pillar" was the mysterious stone on which Jacob laid his head and which he erected the next morning, calling it *beth-el*, house of God. This stone fascinated subsequent generations, and some of its fragments entered into the mythology of peoples: in England, for example, the palladium that is the "London Stone" and the lost relic that is the "Stone of Scone" (used as a throne during the coronation of Scottish sovereigns before Scotland was annexed by England. Today it is kept in Westminster Abbey). In our liturgy, the stone on which God rests is naturally considered to be his dwelling place, the *beth-el*. As for the mysterious word *titulus* (stele), it came to be commonly used to refer to an altar, or the church in which it stands; it is taken, of course, from the text of Genesis according to the Vulgate (28:17-18), where it corresponds to the Hebrew word *matzevah*, more generally translated as "monument". The rite of consecration of the altar, in the Common of the Dedication of a Church, recalls this theme several times: *Terribilis est locus iste* is the antiphon that precedes the *Benedictus*; the prayer recited before the sprinkling of the altar says that it was "prefigured by the stone erected by the patriarch Jacob"; the antiphon *Vidit Jacob scalam* comes at the end of the sprinkling of the church; the responsory following the homily says: *Erit mihi Dominus in Deum, et lapis iste, quem erexi, in titulum, vocabitur Domus Dei...* We can see, therefore, that there are many references to Jacob during this ceremony. And the meaning is always the same: just as Jacob's ladder connected earth to heaven and, for him, the stone was God's resting place, so the altar of the Christian church is the central point of communication between God and earth, God's resting place.

Then, still in the same text, Saint Gregory identifies Jacob's stone with the foundations of the Church; he quotes Saint Paul, for whom the apostles and prophets are the foundation stones, Christ Himself being the cornerstone: *Et quis lapis iste alius, nisi ille exprimitur, quem Paulus in laude fidelium predicat, dicens: "superædificati super fundamentum apostolorum, et prophetarum, ipso summo angulari lapide Christo Jesu"*⁶ . The stone altar representing Christ, the cornerstone, the rock of salvation, the rock that gave water to the Israelites in the desert - this is a theme to which we will return.

Saint Jerome says that every Christian altar is, in a mystical sense, always the one and only Altar; he emphasises: "It is said that there is only one altar, just as there is only one faith, one baptism and one Church" - *Unum altare dicitur, quomodo una fides, et unum baptisma, et una*

⁴ SAINT THOMAS AQUINAS: *Summa theologiae*, III, 83, 4 ad 5.

⁵ SAINT GREGORY THE GREAT: *Opera omnia*, Paris 1705, II, Part 2, 75d.

⁶ SAINT GREGORY THE GREAT: loc. cit., quoting Eph 2:20.

*Ecclesia*⁷ . Elsewhere he says: "There must be only one altar in this world; multiple altars are erected in opposition to that of the Church, but we know that they are not of the Lord" - *Unum autem altare Ægypti, id est, mundi istius dicitur, at cuncta altaria, quæ contra Ecclesia eriguntur altare, sciamus esse non Domini*⁸ . This does not mean, of course, that in St Jerome's mind there should be only one place for Christians to perform sacrifice, as was the case for the Jews, but rather that, mystically, all the altars in the world are one and the same altar, as if space and time were folded back to meet at a single point on each altar. Pagan and heretical altars are not in harmony with the one Christian altar, and so they are multiple, they are divided, they are not of God.

The consecration of the altar means that it is set apart as a holy thing, given to God to be his property, and therefore can no longer be used for profane purposes. The Fathers are unanimous in their horror at the desecration of an altar, whether by pagans or heretics. St Athanasius tells us that the Arians "committed impieties and misdeeds on the holy table, sacrificing birds and molluscs..."⁹ . St Jerome recalls that, during the Great Persecution, pagans "kept their horses near the altars of Christ and dug up the bones of martyrs"¹⁰ . Later, Optatus recounts that the Donatists desecrated the altars that had been used by Catholics, scraping off the holy chrism that had consecrated them, or breaking them, "altars on which the prayers of the people and the members of Christ had been laid, where Almighty God had been invoked." - *Quid enim est tam sacrilegium, quam altaria Dei frangere, radere, remove? In quibus vota populi, et membra Christi posita sunt, quo Deus omnipotens invocatus sit*¹¹ . Saint Bede mentions with horror the blasphemous "mixed temple" built by King Redwald of East Anglia, in which there was an altar for sacrifice to Christ and a pseudo-altar (*arulam*) for the victims of demons¹² .

All the Fathers affirm the difference between the Christian altar and the pagan altar: they are careful not to use the same word when referring to them. It is true that Saint Paul uses the neutral word *trapeza* when he states that one cannot "partake of the Lord's table and the table of demons" (1 Cor 10:21), but this passage implies an obvious parallel between the Christian altar and the pagan sacrificial altar. The word *quasiasthrion* appears for the first time—probably introduced by Saint Barnabas—in the Epistle to the Hebrews (13:10): "We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat..." In the Septuagint, the word *quasiasthrion* usually refers to the Jewish altar of burnt offerings, and pagans never used it to refer to their own altars. This term became commonly used by the Greek Fathers to refer to the altar, although they also commonly refer to it as the "holy table" or "table of the Lord". It should also be remembered that, in Greek, the word *trapeza* meant much more than just a board on which to eat; it was also sometimes, among

⁷ SAINT JEROME: *Opera omnia*, ed. Vallarsi, Verona 1734-1742, IV, 208: *In Isaiam*, V, xx.

⁸ SAINT JEROME: IV, 297: *In Isaiam*, VII, chap. xix.

⁹ SAINT ATHANASIUS: *Opera omnia*, Paris 1698, I, p. 113d.

¹⁰ SAINT JEROME: I, 342, Epistola LX.

¹¹ OPTATUS: *De schismate Donatistarum*, VI, ed. Joannes Cochlaeus, Mainz 1549, pp. 63-64.

¹² BEDE: *Historia ecclesiastica*, II, 15.

other things, a money changer's counter, a bank: it is there that the riches of the Lord are dispensed to us. The classical term continued to be used to refer to pagan altars, as in the important text in which Chrysostom tells us that even in the distant islands of Britain, beyond the circles of the world, pagan altars are being destroyed to build Christian ones¹³. Latin makes an identical distinction between *the* pagan *ara* and the Christian *altare*, but this differentiation is less systematic than in Greek. When Celsus accuses Christians of not having an altar, Origen readily admits this, but at the same time affirms that, in a sense, every Christian soul is an altar¹⁴.

Returning to our *Rubricæ generales*, we read that the altar must be "covered with three cloths or tablecloths (*mappis seu tobaleis*), blessed by the bishop or by an authorised delegate, (...) and adorned with a coloured pallium". This is mentioned by several Fathers: *Quis fidelium nescit, in peragendis mysteriis ipsa ligna lintheamine cooperiri?*¹⁵, asks Optatus. In the rite of consecration, the covering of the altar is accompanied by the reading of a text from the Book of Tobit (13:13, 14-17), which is in fact the blessing of Tobit's marriage. This delicately suggests that the altar can represent the marriage bed where Christ, the Bridegroom, meets his Bride, the Church, an idea also evoked by the veil of the tabernacle and found in the usual arrangement of curtains around the altar as if it were a four-poster bed¹⁶. However, here again, the altar cloths mainly evoke the idea that the altar represents Christ Himself. And this meaning is particularly emphasised when, on Holy Thursday and Good Friday, the altar is stripped of the cloths that cover it. Rupert Tuitensis notes that the altar is rightly stripped as Christ Himself was stripped of His clothes on Calvary: *Cum ergo altare Christum significat, recte ob commemorationem horum vestitu et ornatu suo spoliatum est*¹⁷.

Next, the *Rubricæ generales* prescribe that on the altar there should be "a cross in the middle, and at least two candles on each side". This cross is mentioned by Chrysostom when he says that the cross can be seen everywhere in places of honour, even on the imperial crown; and, he adds, "on the holy table there is the cross¹⁸". Saint Thomas goes so far as to identify the altar with the Cross: *Altare est repræsentativum crucis ipsius*¹⁹. Augustine reminds us that the altar must be decorated and venerated in honour of the relics found there, just as a sword sheath is adorned in honour of the blade: *Cujus (sc. Cypriani) victricis animæ sanctam carnem, tamquam frameæ illius vaginam, hoc loco sublimitate divini altaris ornamus*²⁰. This ornamentation of the altar and the reverence due to it are universally attested, as evidenced by the extraordinarily rich altar hangings housed in our museums and treasuries. In England, one of the few altars to survive from the first

¹³ SAINT JOHN CHRYSOSTOM: I, 575b.

¹⁴ ORIGEN: *Opera omnia*, ed. C. Delaine, Paris 1733-1759, I, 574

¹⁵ OPTATUS: loc. cit.

¹⁶ Cf. GEOFFREY WEBB: *The Liturgical Altar*, 1939, p. 45.

¹⁷ *From Div. Off.*, v. 30; quoted in DANIEL ROCK: *The Church of our Fathers*, 1905 edition, I, 184n.

¹⁸ SAINT JOHN CHRYSOSTOM: I, 569e.

¹⁹ SAINT THOMAS AQUINAS: *Summa Theologica*, III, 83, 1 ad 2.

²⁰ SAINT AUGUSTINE: *Opera Omnia*, Antwerp 1600, V, 878d, sermo CCCXIII.

millennium is the stone altar at Bradford-upon-Avon, carved in imitation of a woven cloth covering, divided into panels by braids. The richness of the ornamentation of altars can be judged from the *Pala d'oro* in Venice, which was originally an altar frontal. This reminds us that splendour is one of the Christian virtues. However, the *Rubricæ generales* take care to limit what may adorn the altar beyond what is necessary for Mass, *nihil omnino ponatur*. Ancient documents tell us that there was already a frequent tendency to place things on the altar that had no place there: the *Canones apostolorum* rebuke bishops or priests who serve milk, brandy, sweets, animals or beans on the altar²¹ .

If we move from *the Rubricæ generales* to the actual Mass itself (with occasional returns to the rubrics), we can see how the different aspects of the altar are illustrated during the ceremony.

The first time the altar is mentioned is when the priest, upon entering, "bows respectfully" before it and remains standing at the foot of the altar while reciting the psalm and the acts of penitence, before "ascending to the altar" while reciting the *Aufer a nobis* prayer, which expresses his unworthiness and his desire to enter the sanctuary "with a pure soul". It should be noted that, during the liturgy, the priest is often reminded that he is a sinner. If the priest is barely worthy of approaching the altar, how much more so is this true of the laity! Cassiodorus tells us that Ambrose was once forced to humiliate the emperor himself: the emperor had presumed to enter the sanctuary, *inter cancellos*, to present his offering on the altar himself, *ad altare offerens*, which Ambrose formally forbade him to do; and the emperor humbly accepted this prohibition²² . Chrysostom, who had already noted the formidable nature of the altar, reminds us that one must be pure of all sin to approach it, and he enjoins those who are not worthy to keep their distance²³ . In his commentary on the psalm *Introibo ad altare Dei*, Cassiodorus emphasises the difference between the unruly crowd that surrounds our earthly altars and the purity of the altar in the heaven to come²⁴ .

Then the priest greets the altar by kissing it. Although the rubrics say nothing about this, custom dictates that the priest place his hands flat on the altar, outside the corporal, when he kisses the altar, while the poor deacon and subdeacon must keep their hands clasped and are not allowed to touch the altar. Only anointed hands may be placed on the anointed *mensa*. We already find this distinction in Chrysostom who, rebuking those who presume to touch the altar in confirmation of an oath, declares: "How dare you, impure as you are, touch the holy table, when even all the clergy are not allowed to do so, and that is to swear an oath?"²⁵ . If the priest, by this kiss, shows his veneration and affection for the altar, it is obviously because the altar is closely associated with Our Lord Himself. Saint Jerome praises the reverence with which Theophilus serves at the altar and highly approves of those who consider the chalice, the corporal and all objects associated with the

²¹ *Patres Apostolici*, ed. J. COTCLERIUS, Amsterdam 1724, II, 442.

²² CASSIODORUS: *Opera omnia*, ed. J. Garetius, Venice 1729, I, 319b.

²³ SAINT JOHN CHRYSOSTOM: II, 326 and IV, 769b.

²⁴ CASSIODORUS: II, 136, 2.

²⁵ SAINT JOHN CHRYSOSTOM: IX, 79a.

Passion of the Lord to be holy, for although they are inert and inanimate objects, they are nonetheless sacred: on the contrary, they should be accorded the same veneration as they are associated with the body and blood of the Lord: *Qua debeant veneratione sancta suscipere, et altaris Christo ministerio deservire; sacrosque calices et sacra velamines, et cætera, quæ ad cultum Dominicæ pertinent passionis, non quasi inania, et sensu carentia sanctimoniam non habere, sed ex consortio corporis et sanguinis Domini eadem qua corpus ejus et sanguinis majestate veneranda*²⁶ .

This kiss is accompanied by a silent invocation of the saints whose relics are enshrined in the altar. And this brings us to one of the most important aspects of the Christian altar: it is the tomb of a martyr, and therefore the icon of Christ's tomb. Authors throughout the ages attest that martyrs were buried under altars, or rather that altars were built over the tombs of martyrs; this is already mentioned in the Apocalypse of St John: "I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God..." (Rev 6:10). In the Roman catacombs, many small chapels were built on the site where a martyr's tomb had served as an altar, for example that of Veneranda in the Catacomb of Domitilla, where the rock behind the altar is covered with a painting of the martyrs. In this case, the altar faces east, but this is not always the case, and the small room carved into the rock is barely large enough for half a dozen worshippers to stand behind the priest. Rather than introducing a new custom, the decree of Felix I (269-275) that Mass should be celebrated on the tombs of the martyrs was probably a restriction on the practice of saying Mass anywhere²⁷ .

Prudence gives us the testimony of a near-contemporary on the burial of Hippolytus: "It was decided that his body would be covered and that an altar dedicated to God would be built above it; it is the table that dispenses the sacraments, faithful guardian of the martyr. It preserves the bones in the tomb, in the hope of the eternal Judge, and nourishes those who live on the banks of the Tiber at the sacred banquet." *Talibus Hyppoliti corpus mandatur opertis, Propter ubi apposita est ara dedicata Deo, Illa sacramenti donatrix mensa, eademque Custos fida sui martyris apposita, Servat ad æterni spem judicis ossa sepulcro; Pascit idem sanctis Tibricolas dapibus*²⁸ .

At first, as Roman law prohibited the transport of corpses, altars and churches had to be built on top of existing tombs, which often presented enormous difficulties. The tiny chapels in the catacombs were far too small for regular worship, so churches had to be built above ground, directly above these tombs, which often required the removal of enormous quantities of rock, as in the Basilica of Saint Domitilla, and also in the Basilica of Constantine on Vatican Hill. St Augustine mentions the sacrifice offered on the tombs of martyrs many times, but he emphasises that, of course, this sacrifice is not offered to the martyr: "If it is true that we present our offering on the tombs (*memorias*) of the martyrs, is it not to God that we present this offering? (...) Here, we are not building an altar to Stephen, but from Stephen's relics, we are making an altar to God, and these altars are pleasing to God." *Etiam apud memorias sanctorum martyrum cum offerimus, nonne Deo*

²⁶ SAINT JEROME: I, 753, Epistola CXIV.

²⁷ J. S. NORTHCOTE and W. R. BROWNLOW: *Roma Sotteranea*, London 1879, p. 241.

²⁸ AURELII PRUDENTII CLEMENTIS V.C.: *Opera omnia*, Cameraci 1821; PERI STEFANON *Hyppolitus* II, 175, p. 159.

*offerimus? (...) Nos enim in isto loco non aram fecimus Stephano, sed de reliquiis Stephani aram Deo. Grata sunt Deo hujusmodi altaria*²⁹ .

In Saint Gregory's time, the law had clearly changed: it was now possible to transfer the bodies of martyrs to the sites of new churches. This change may have been due to the worsening political situation: the old cemeteries were located outside the city walls, where the situation was unsafe. So, since the faithful could no longer leave the protection of the cities to visit the martyrs, the martyrs themselves had to come to the cities. In his letters, the Pope authorised bishops to recover the relics of martyrs and place them in the new churches: for example, he recommended that the Bishop of Sorrento check whether the body of a martyr had been buried in the chapel of the monastery of St Stephen in Capri and, if not, to bring one there: *Ad prædictum monasterium te jubemus accedere, et si ibidem nullum corpus constat humatum, prædicta sanctuaria solemnitate collabis, ut devotionis suæ patiatur effectu*. Similarly, he wrote to Bishop Palladius of Saintes, in Gaul, saying that he was sending him enough relics to consecrate four of the thirteen altars in the new church that the bishop was building. In his instructions to Saint Augustine, whom he sent on a mission to Kent, he recommended seizing pagan temples, destroying idols, sprinkling them with holy water, erecting altars and placing relics beneath them: *Altaria construantur, reliquiae ponantur*³⁰ .

There is an obvious affinity between the tomb of a martyr and the tomb of Christ (Romans 6:8); so it is not surprising that, for the Fathers, the altar could represent the Holy Sepulchre, where Christ's body rests and where the Resurrection is renewed every day. *The Historia mystagoga*, attributed to St Cyril but probably written by St Germanus of Constantinople (634-733), says that the holy table is the tomb where the body and blood of Christ are laid, and therefore the dwelling place of God. The altar is located near Calvary because it is the place of sacrifice³¹ . Theodore the Studite (759-826) gives a mystical equivalent to each element of the liturgy: the holy chrism represents the anointing of Christ's body, the holy table is the tomb from which life springs forth, the altar cloth is the shroud in which Christ's body was wrapped, the holy lance is the one that pierced Christ's side, the sponge is the one from which He drank, and the image of the cross is the tree of life³² . Similarly, in a commentary on Saint Luke, Saint Bede says of the corporal that it is the shroud of Christ, for the Holy Sepulchre has the shape of the Lord's altar: *Nam et sepulcrum ille venerabile figuram Dominici habebat altaris, in quo carnis ejus et sanguinis solent mysteria celebrari*³³ .

This identification of the altar with a tomb – the tomb of a martyr, the tomb of Christ, and therefore the tomb of all the faithful departed – also inspired the design of funerary monuments. At

²⁹ SAINT AUGUSTINE: V, 773b; 886c.

³⁰ SAINT GREGORY THE GREAT: II, 547c, *Epistolæ* I, LIV; 828a, *Epistolæ* VI, XLIX; 1176b, *Epistolæ* XI, LXXXVI.

³¹ SAINT CYRIL: *Opera omnia*, ed. Thos Milles, Oxford 1703, pp. 325–326.

³² THEODORE THE STUDITE: *Adversus Iconomachos*, in Jacobi Sirmund (ed.): *Opera Varia*, Venice 1728, V, 167a.

³³ BEDE: *In Lucae Evang.*, VI, 24, P. L. XCII, 623; quoted in ROCK: *op. cit.* (note 16), I, 193.

the beginning of the second millennium, the altar was usually surmounted by a *ciborium* supported by four pillars and surrounded by curtains, evoking the image of the bridal bed, which we have already mentioned. Tombs took the same form: a sarcophagus, often draped in stone, surrounded by four pillars and stone curtains opened by angels. The most accomplished examples of this type of tomb are the 13th- and 14th-century monuments from the Angevin period in Naples, or those of the papal court in the vicinity of Rome. Sometimes the angels are dressed as subdeacons, opening or closing the curtains on the stone-draped tomb, on which lies the body of the faithful Christian, closely identified with the body of Christ. In some cases, behind these tombs, a procession is carved in relief on the wall, its members carrying liturgical books, holy water, candles and censers. Fragments of a very beautiful tomb of this type can be seen in the cloisters of the Lateran, in honour of Riccardo di Sureto (1289). A more complete and detailed example can be found in Naples Cathedral, built for Cardinal Frederico Carbone (1405).

The incensing of the altar also evokes the memory of the dead: the celebrant walks around the altar—if it is not leaning against a wall—with the censer, just as he would around a coffin at a funeral. Curiously, the Roman rite does not include any prayer to accompany this act at the beginning of Mass. The meaning of this gesture, of course, has always been to honour the thing being incensed: the altar is venerated and treated with respect because it is a holy thing, for so many different reasons.

But another aspect appears when the celebrant kisses the altar again, just before saying *Dominus vobiscum*. Each time the celebrant turns to greet the people, he will always begin by kissing the altar; this is also the case for the *Orate Fratres* and for the final blessing. The only time he says *Dominus vobiscum* without kissing the altar—or turning towards the people—he must keep his hands flat on the altar. All this, apparently, is because the altar itself can represent the people: the body of Christ, as we have seen, is identified with the body of each of the faithful and, of course, with the body of all the faithful gathered together. The altar is therefore also a symbol of the Church, and its unity symbolises the unity of the Church. The fact that the stone altar must be made of a single piece symbolises the essential unity of the faithful: *Per altare signatur Ecclesia, juxta quod Dominus dixit in Exodo, si altare lapideum feceris mihi, non ædificabis illud de sectis lapidibus. Quod sectionem lapidem prohibet in altari, divisionem fidelium reprobatur, ne ecclesia dividatur per errores et schismata*³⁴.

This unity of the Church and the altar is an idea commonly found among the Fathers; St. Ignatius says: "There is only one altar for the whole Church, one bishop, with his presbyters and my fellow ministers, the deacons"³⁵. On several occasions, Jerome points out that the pagans have many altars, but the Church has only one: *Non unum altare, quod habet Ecclesia, sed altaria hæreticorum plurima*³⁶. In the same vein, Cyprian says that no altar other than that of the Church can be erected: *Aliud altare constitui aut sacerdotium novum fieri præter unum altare et unum*

³⁴ INNOCENT III: *De sacro altaris mysterio*, II, 3; P. L. CCXVII, 803; quoted in ROCK: *op. cit.* (note 16), I, 193.

³⁵ SAINT IGNATIUS: *ad Phil.* IV, verse 13; in: *Patres apostolici* I, 77.

³⁶ SAINT JEROME: IV, 297; cf. also the preceding quotations.

*sacerdotium non potest. Quisquis alibi collegerit spargit*³⁷. St. Gregory also expresses this notion of identity between the altar and the community of the faithful: *Quid est altare Dei, nisi mens bene viventium? (...) Quid vero accipimus altare Dei nisi animam iusti?*³⁸ Anselm affirms that the altar represents the faith of Christians: *Altare vicem fidei Christianæ tenet*³⁹. For Amalarius, the kiss is a sign of peace, and the altar kissed by the priest represents the hearts of the elect⁴⁰. In his own unique way, Chrysostom emphasises the social aspect of the liturgy, saying that there is only one altar to unite all the faithful, rich and poor, slaves and free men⁴¹.

We now come to the offertory: the altar is incensed, and this time the gesture is accompanied by words. During the blessing of the incense, we invoke Saint Michael the Archangel, who stands at the right hand of the altar of incense (Rev 8:3-5), reminding us that in the Old Testament there were two altars: the altar of incense and the altar of burnt offering. The Fathers found in the works of Philo a rich source of allegorical interpretations: for him, the altar of burnt offerings represented the world of the senses because it was visible and tangible, while the altar of incense represented transcendental ideas because it was hidden in the inner part of the temple⁴². Saint Thomas takes up this theme and expands on it⁴³, but Saint Gregory internalises this distinction between the two altars, which for him represent two stages of repentance: the first, repentance through fear, and the second, repentance through love⁴⁴. Amalarius specifically states that our present altar is prefigured by the altar of burnt offerings, with the various sacrifices that were offered there, but that it is adapted to represent the altar of incense when we sing the *Sanctus*: *In præsentis officio altare nostrum præfiguratur ab altari holocausti, quo immolabantur victimæ pro peccato, pro regno, pro sanctuario, pro ludo, pro votis, pro spontaneis... Tempore quo hymnus ante passionem celebratur, altare nostrum aptatur altari Thymiamatum*⁴⁵. He then takes up St. Gregory's theme of the two forms of repentance. The psalm recited during the incensing of the altar also evokes this theme of repentance and the need to have a pure conscience when we approach the central mystery of our faith.

We find this same theme in the psalm *Lavabo*, which evokes purity and integrity. We have already seen that the Fathers preached the need for repentance and conversion of heart before approaching the formidable altar. When, before *the Orate fratres*, the priest kisses the altar again,

³⁷ SAINT CYPRIAN: *Opera omnia*, ed. S. Baluzi, Paris 1726, p. 53.

³⁸ SAINT GREGORY THE GREAT: I, 1427d; II, 43c.

³⁹ Quoted in ROCK: *op. cit.* (note 16), I, 209.

⁴⁰ AMALARIUS: "De Officio missæ", in: *Speculum antiquæ devotionis circa missam*, ed. Johannes COCHLÆUS, Mainz 1549, p. 12.

⁴¹ SAINT JOHN CHRYSOSTOM: III, 753d.

⁴² PHILO OF ALEXANDRIA: *Opera omnia*, ed. Thos Mangey, London 1742, I, 378.

⁴³ SAINT THOMAS AQUINAS: I, II, 102, ad 6.

⁴⁴ SAINT GREGORY THE GREAT: III (II) 321 a-b.

⁴⁵ AMALARIUS: *op. cit.*, pp. 30 and 38.

this reminds us that the altar can represent the people, whom the celebrant greets and asks to give their consent to the sacrifice. It is interesting to note that, in the Roman rite, the celebrant frequently turns to the people and greets them. In the Preface dialogue, although all eyes are turned towards the east and the priest therefore does not need to attract the attention of the faithful, he places his hands flat on the altar, as we have already seen, saying *Dominus vobiscum*.

We now come to the canon of the Mass, where our attention is drawn to two of the most important meanings of the altar. When he says *per Jesum Christum Dominum nostrum*, the priest kisses the altar, because it represents Christ Himself. It is the primary icon of the Saviour in a Christian church: although the veneration accorded to the altar is also inspired by other reasons, the first and foremost is that the altar is identified with Christ - And this is, of course, the reason why the altar should face east, towards the Sun of Justice that is about to rise, as has now been well established by Klaus Gamber and others, although, curiously, Walafrid Strabo (808-849) says that this is of no importance since God is everywhere⁴⁶.

In a commentary on the last verse of *the Miserere*, which refers to offering young bulls on the altar, Saint Gregory categorically states: "The altar is the Son of God," adding that the commandment to build an altar on earth (Ex 20:24) is a type of the Incarnation. This identification is even clearer if we think of a stone altar, since the Rock is Christ: *Altare Dei Filius est, de quo ipse Dominus ait, altare de terra facietis mihi. Quid est enim aliud altare de terra facere, nisi de Dei Filii incarnatione non dubitare... Petra autem erat Christus. Ipse ergo est petra ad quem cogitationes nostras tenemus; ipse altare, cujus clementia peccatorum victimas imponere praesumimus*⁴⁷. Saint Thomas takes up exactly the same interpretation⁴⁸, and this is also, of course, one of the themes preached by Saint Paul in his sermons relating to the Rock from which the Israelites drank in the desert. According to the Talmud, this rock actually accompanied the Israelites in the desert to provide them with a permanent source of water⁴⁹. In the Old Testament, the Rock is often identified with the Lord Himself, which makes the transition to Christ all the easier. Philo says that the Rock is the wisdom of God and that, after being watered by the Rock, the people are fed with manna, which is the Logos, two attributes that the Christian Fathers attributed to the Son of God⁵⁰. We can therefore conceive of the altar as a source or fountain of grace and, through a natural transition from water to fire, say: "a flame springs forth from it as water springs forth from a fountain"⁵¹.

⁴⁶ WALAFRID STRABO: "De Exordiis et Incrementis Rerum Ecclesiasticarum", in: Cochlæus: *Speculum*, p. 71.

⁴⁷ SAINT GREGORY THE GREAT: III (II) 321 a-b.

⁴⁸ SAINT THOMAS AQUINAS: III, 83, 4 ad 5.

⁴⁹ See the authors who, with regard to 1 Cor 10:4, refer to the Targum of Onkelos and the Mishna Traktate *Tosefta Sukka*, III, 11, 12.

⁵⁰ PHILO OF ALEXANDRIA: I, 81-82, on Deut 8:15.

⁵¹ SAINT JOHN CHRYSOSTOM: I, 500b.

For Chrysostom, the essential Catholic doctrine of the Mass is not the work of man but of Jesus Christ, and our altar is identical to the sacrifice of Christ. He carefully avoids giving the impression that it is the table of an ordinary meal, even when he speaks of the Supper, because he clearly identifies this Passover meal with the sacrifice of our Redemption. The sacrifice that Christ offered during this Passover is identical to the one we offer now. We take the place of the apostles; and it is He who sanctifies and transubstantiates, if I may translate *it thus*⁵². In his commentary on the curious text: "Where the body is, there the eagles gather" (Mt 24:28), Saint Ambrose explains that the body represents the altar, and therefore the body of Christ on the altar, and that we are the eagles, renewed by the baptismal font where our sins are washed away: *Forma corporis altare est, et Corpus Christi est in altari: aquilæ vos estis, renovatæ ablutione delicti*⁵³. He returns to this theme several times, reminding us that the altar is nothing other than the form—the mould—of the body of Christ, and that when we approach the altar, it is to receive the body of Christ: *Quid enim est altare, nisi forma corporis Christi? ... Ergo venisti ad altare, accepisti corpus Christi*. Saint Augustine adds that the altar, or what comes from the altar, is the wedding garment with which even the last-minute guest must be clothed⁵⁴.

It is the altar that makes the Church, the sacrifice that makes the altar. On several occasions, the Roman rite very explicitly identifies the altar with Christ, for example in the office of the dedication of the Lateran: "The altar, anointed with holy chrism, to represent Jesus Christ Our Lord, who is at once our Altar, our Victim and our Priest" - ... *altare, quod chrismate delibutum, Domini nostri Jesu Christi, qui altare, hostia et sacerdos noster est*⁵⁵. In the rite of ordination of subdeacons, the *Pontifical* says that "the Altar of the Holy Church is Christ Himself". This is also why, during the rite of consecration of the altar, it is anointed with holy chrism: because it represents the Anointed One, the *Christus*, the Son of God consecrated priest, prophet and King by anointing⁵⁶.

The final mystical meaning of the altar is revealed to us after the consecration, when the epiclesis of the Roman Canon says: *Supplices te rogamus, omnipotens Deus, jube hæc perferri per manus sancti Angeli tui in sublime altare tuum, in conspectu divinæ majestatis tuæ : ut quotquot ex hæc altaris participatione sacrosanctum Filii tui Corpus et Sanguinem sumpserimus, omni benedictione cælesti et gratia repleamur*. Here, the physical altar at the centre of our church is a type of the heavenly altar that stands before the throne of God. And here we enter into the heart of the mystery: there is only one Christian altar, because there is only one heavenly altar, one type, one form, of which every earthly altar is a copy.

⁵² ST JOHN CHRYSOSTOM: VII, 789a, *In Matth.* 26:35.

⁵³ SAINT AMBROSE: *Opera omnia*, Paris 1686-1690, vol. II, 366 and 374.

⁵⁴ SAINT AUGUSTINE: V, 342.

⁵⁵ Office of 9 November, 2nd nocturne, 4th lesson; these references and others can be found in WEBB: *op. cit.*

⁵⁶ SAINT THOMAS AQUINAS: III, 83, 3 ad 2.

Here we clearly see a Platonic influence, but naturally filtered through Philo, who, as we know, believed that Plato had drawn all his ideas from the book of Genesis, with the dual creation of "heaven and earth" representing the two worlds of ideas and senses⁵⁷. In Jewish thought, it was commonly accepted that everything that exists on earth has a parallel reality in heaven, an idea that is found even in the New Testament. Each individual altar can therefore be considered a parallel to the one altar in heaven and, consequently, there is only one altar, just as there is only one Church and one sacrifice. We who are accustomed to the theory of relativity find this easier to understand than it might have been in ancient times. To approach an earthly altar is to step onto a bridge between heaven and earth; to touch the altar is to touch its real counterpart in heaven. Each stone of the altar occupies the same point in space and time. It is therefore not surprising that, for Chrysostom, the altar was "formidable" because, as we approach the altar, we approach the throne of the Most High Himself, and the very centre of creation.

And yet we can touch with our hands what the seraphim can only touch with tongues! For the altar that Isaiah saw, and from which the coal was taken and brought to his lips, is a type of our altar, as Chrysostom says. St Augustine makes the same observation: unworthy as we are, we dare to touch what is the earthly antitype of God's own altar: *Est caeleste altare, et non amplectitur illud altare, nisi qui lavat manus in innocentibus. Nam multi altare hoc tangunt indigni, et tolerat Deus pati injuriam ad tempus sacramenta sua*⁵⁸. Once again, this reminds us how unworthy we priests are to stand in this place and that, during Mass, we must often collect ourselves and abandon ourselves to God's mercy, lest the mere act of touching this sacred stone be enough to strike us down, as Uzza was struck down for touching the Ark!

⁵⁷ PHILO OF ALEXANDRIA: I, 30-31.

⁵⁸ SAINT AUGUSTINE: IV 275b, on Psalm 25; cf. also a very similar passage on p. 275b on Psalm 42.