From the table to the stone altar: a historical analysis

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1. Introduction

Christianity has existed for nearly two thousand years. In its Catholic and Orthodox forms, it connects post-communist Europe to imperial Rome without interruption; beyond that, the Bible takes us back to the very origins of creation. We therefore have a vast and rich spiritual heritage. Its influence on human progress has been enormous, and in turn, this progress has also influenced Christianity. Historically and theologically, the first three centuries of the Christian era contributed decisively to determining the substance and form of the doctrine and heritage bequeathed to later ages. What Catholicism represents today and what it strives to preserve for future generations are essentially the fruits of those first three centuries. Later eras were to clarify and define the message even further, in symbols of faith and a set of legal canons, but always based on what was universally taught and believed in the days of the Apostolic and Patristic Church. This historical period is therefore sometimes a source of controversy among specialists. This was particularly true after the Protestant Reformation and up to and including the 19th century. And it remains true today. For centuries, the sources from this early period have been analysed and debated extensively. Those who consider the Church of the medieval and post-medieval periods to be more or less deviant and decadent seek to support their claims with evidence drawn from the study of these early centuries, in which we find traces of ecclesial discipline, doctrine and worship, whose main characteristics were simplicity, spontaneity and purity. They claim that these virtues were more or less corrupted by the Edict of Milan and what followed. According to their view, at the same time as direct persecution ceased, the fact that the clergy occupied a more prominent place and exercised greater influence in society led them to adopt the behaviour and trappings of civil servants and courtiers, to the detriment of pure evangelical religion. Thus, some historians and theologians came to regard the period of the persecuted Church as an ideal to be revived and emulated. It had been replaced by a compromise which, in the long run, had resulted in the abuse of power and the adoption of foreign ideas and practices. Only by rediscovering the ideals of that time could we hope to correct what are perceived as the shortcomings of our own time.

Undoubtedly, the era of the first martyrs and confessors was a glorious one for the Church; however, it did not unfold without internal strife and difficulties. At the same time, while it must be acknowledged that in the early stages of Christianity certain things were much less centralised than they were later on, we must nevertheless take into account the evidence showing that a clear system of authority, government and liturgy was established in a relatively short period of time. Over time, legislation, hierarchy and tradition developed and grew. The history of the evolution of the Christian altar in buildings designed for worship is one aspect of this important transition.

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Like other areas of ecclesiological research, the study of liturgy gives rise to a number of controversies. Some consider early liturgy to have been direct, simple, pure and undiluted by the influences of court rituals and the trappings of monarchy. It was fundamentally communal and plebeian, rather than hieratic and majestic. One might think that the ceremonious and seemingly distant unfolding of the liturgy in later centuries contrasts with the fervent gatherings of the early Christians in each other's homes or in the catacombs, gathered to faithfully commemorate and celebrate the Eucharist of the Risen Lord.

Considering the sources of information available to us, we are forced to conclude that this reasoning has serious flaws. This is particularly true with regard to the whole question of tradition, faith and continuity, but also of divine inspiration and guidance of the Church; and it is equally true when it comes to understanding how doctrine and, consequently, worship developed. All this would require specific analysis! Another source of misunderstanding, which deserves closer study, is the view that, while perpetually beset by persecution, the Church was hardly in a position to establish itself according to a well-defined system of authority and a clear ritual, and that it probably did not wish to do so. It is often assumed that early liturgy, being largely secret and private, ruled out any possibility of fixed cultic canons and places recognisable in their form as churches. This assumption is only verifiable to a certain extent and cannot be applied universally for reasons that will become apparent when we examine more closely what the historical sources tell us. All such assertions should always be verified to ensure that our judgement is sound.

Fortunately, certain ancient sources of information, as well as important archaeological and other discoveries, can guide us in our studies. We hope that by examining some of these sources, we will be able to shed some light on the subject of this presentation. What we would like to do is try to rediscover a little of the *sensus Ecclesiæ* and the practice of the early Church, particularly with regard to the use and construction of altars. Of course, we cannot provide an exhaustive analysis, and therefore the field of study will be limited to the Latin and Western Church. It will consist of three parts:

- a general presentation of the Church at that time: a persecuted minority but still growing, from Claudius to Constantine;

- a summary presentation of certain archaeological discoveries and other evidence relevant to our study;

- a conclusion in which we will attempt to summarise the two previous sections.

2. Persecution and progress – from the year 41 to the Edict of 313

When we talk about the early Church, we often imagine small groups of tightly knit and virtually autonomous communities, made up of fervent believers who were constantly threatened with savage persecution and who, as a result, had little opportunity to develop and establish their own structures. This image needs to be corrected by taking into account the periods of relative peace that Christians experienced during these centuries. There were often long periods during which,

although the legislation still existed, persecution was not overt. In some cases, although severe, this persecution was limited to a city, region or province of the Empire. Moreover, some of these persecutions were short-lived, ending with the death – brutal or otherwise – of the emperor responsible. Finally, the documents we have from this period and the one that followed provide evidence that paints a more positive picture of the condition of the Church: they show that, gradually, its confidence was growing and its organisational structures were becoming more refined.

In this story, the periods of peace between persecutions play an important role, precisely because they gave the Church the space and time to consolidate, organise and develop. We must not imagine that the large and well-organised Christian community to which Emperor Constantine granted tolerance and public protection in 313 was of no importance in the society of the time, or that it arose overnight. Although its progress was undoubtedly slowed or halted at times during those early centuries, it nevertheless continued.

Of the 249 years between the first major persecution—during Nero's reign in 64—and the Edict of Milan in 313[2] , it has been calculated that Christians were persecuted for approximately 129 years and were more or less tolerated for some 120 years. Twenty years separate Nero's death from the two years of persecution they suffered under Domitian (94-96). They were again persecuted intermittently during the reign of Trajan (98-117), then another eighty years passed before the edict of Septimius Severus in 202, which struck them severely. This was followed by some eleven years of peace, interrupted by the persecutions of Decius (249-251) and Valerius (257-270). A period of forty-three years of peace then ensued, until Diocletian's edict triggered the last and most violent persecution. It should be remembered, however, that its worst and most prolonged effects mainly affected the Church in Africa and the East. The western provinces suffered less.

The first persecutions were directed against individuals and communities. In the latter case, the destruction of property was added to the arrests of individuals. We know this because the texts of the edicts relating to these persecutions can be found in ancient written sources on the history of this period[3] . Thus, for example, the Church of Egypt, which was both large and wealthy, suffered greatly from the persecution of Decius[4] . The image that Eusebius gives us is that of a well-organised and prosperous ecclesial community devastated by crisis. The edict that triggered the persecution under Valerius (257) specifically required everyone to conform to the state religion and prohibited all religious assemblies on pain of death, degradation or slavery. The suffering and destruction of property were immense[5] .

As for the last persecution, which began in 303 and continued intermittently for ten years, it was the most devastating. At that time, after forty-three years of peace, the Church had much to lose

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[2] There was one under Claudius (41-54), during which the Jews were expelled from Rome, a measure that also affected Christians (cf. SUETONIUS: *The Lives of the Caesars*, xxv).

[3] EUSEBIUS: *Historia Ecclesiastica*; LACTANTIUS: *De mortibus persecutorum*.

[4] EUSEBIUS: *Historia Ecclesiastica*, VI, XLI.

[5] EUSEBIUS: *Historia Ecclesiastica*, VII, XI.

and was an easy target, as it was strong and well established in the society of the time: it was generally believed that Diocletian's mother and daughter were Christians, or at least sympathisers. The edict relating to this persecution expressly mentions the confiscation of books, sacred vessels and churches[6] . All this clearly shows that, as far as both objects of worship and places of worship themselves were concerned, the Church had much to lose. But it is also clear that some of its places of worship had acquired a permanent character as recognisable meeting places. Very few examples of these ancient places of worship remain. Either new churches were built on top of them, or they simply no longer exist. Some of these were existing residential houses, the interiors of which had been modified to accommodate large numbers of worshippers and to take into account the way in which Mass was celebrated at the time. But perhaps there were others, in other parts of the Empire, which were buildings constructed specifically for worship.

Throughout this early period of the Church, doctrine and organisation continued to develop. In the writings that have come down to us from early Christian authors such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Tertullian, we find a clarity and doctrinal agreement that testify to a community of faith that was far from fragmented and inward-looking. Already, its apologetics were outward-looking, clear, and coherent. Centres of learning and study existed as early as the 2nd century. In Alexandria, Egypt, there was a school of catechesis which, as early as 180, was said to have existed for a long time[7] . A whole system of teaching and instruction was already in place. Other details provided by documents that have survived from this period give us similar indications of a well-established community identity. From the middle of the second century onwards, the diocesan structure based on a single bishop assisted by his priests and deacons was universal practice[8] . Second-century documents such as the *Didache* and the *Shepherd of Hermas*, as well as the writings of Ignatius of Antioch, also show an awareness of belonging to a large universal community. Important information was exchanged at all levels, and at other times, some undertook long journeys to discuss issues affecting the whole communion. Even in liturgical matters, there was a certain uniformity, despite local variations. When, around 154, Bishop Polycarp of Smyrna in Asia Minor travelled to Rome, he was able to celebrate the Eucharist there. All these indications presuppose that, in the different geographical regions, the ritual of the Mass was regulated in a way that was, at least in its main features, uniform[9] . In general, communication and interaction were intense. One example illustrates this: in 220, Bishop Aggripinus of Carthage was able to convene a synod of no fewer than seventy bishops[10] . Once again, it must be emphasised that all this gives us the impression of a community that had a well-defined conception of itself and its mission.

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6 EUSEBIUS: Historia Ecclesiastica, VIII, II sq.

7 EUSEBIUS: Historia Ecclesiastica, V, X.

8 K. BAUS: "From the Apostolic Community to Constantine," in: H. JEDIN, ed., *History of the Church*, vol. I; 148.

9 EUSEBIUS: *Historia Ecclesiastica*, V, XXIV.

10 CYPRIAN, *Ep*. 71, 4.

3. Pre- and post-Constantinian churches: archaeological and documentary evidence

Everyone agrees that the first altars were wooden tables[11] . However, at a time that is difficult to pinpoint, wood was generally replaced by stone. This change undoubtedly took place slowly and gradually: wooden altars continued to be used for some time[12] . But in general, after the beginning of the 4th century, stone and marble structures became increasingly common, although archaeological research has so far made it difficult to determine the exact date of the first stone altars. One of the oldest excavation sites in this regard, that of a specific building adapted as a church, is Dura Europos, in present-day Syria, which is thought to date from around 232[13] . The city was subsequently invaded and then abandoned around 260. It was then covered by sand, and it was not until shortly after 1930 that excavations revealed the presence of a Christian place of worship. It was a double hall that could accommodate about a hundred people. Several frescoes with biblical themes were painted on its walls, and a stone baptistery was also discovered at one end. At the far end of the hall was a raised platform, which is believed to have been the site of the altar. There was no evidence to indicate what material it was made of, but since no remains were found, it is assumed that it was a wooden altar.

In England, during excavations carried out between 1890 and 1891 at Silchester, the site of the ancient Roman town of Calleva Atrebatum, a building was discovered that was identified as a Christian church. Reports on these excavations were published in 1892 and 1894, and a book in 1957[14] . Based on the general layout and style of the church, it was concluded that it must date from the early 4th century. The church was oriented east-west, with the sanctuary at the western end. It was of the basilica type, consisting of a nave and two side transepts, as well as a narthex to the east. In front of the apse was a beautiful mosaic of black, red and grey marble tesserae — from Purbeck — with geometric designs, which clearly marked the location of the altar. The remarkable state of preservation of this mosaic and the traces of mortar have given rise to two theories concerning the altar. The first is that it was originally made of wood and was later replaced by a stone altar. The second is that there was a mat in front of the altar, so that the celebrant faced west, towards the apse, and not east as one might expect, which is an interesting hypothesis![15]

In pre-Saxon England, it seems that there were many churches which, although built of wood, nevertheless had a stone altar. This is the opinion of Father Bridgett, quoting Saint Bede the Venerable (637-735)16, who writes that, after the persecution unleashed by Diocletian, the inhabitants rebuilt their churches and founded shrines for the martyrs[16] . Still quoting Bede[17] ,

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[11] *The Catholic Encyclopaedia*, vol. 1, pp. 346 ff.; *The Catholic Dictionary* (1980), Addis & Arnold eds., pp. 19 ff.; SMITH and CHEETAM eds., *Dictionary of Christian Antiquities* (1870), pp. 60 ff.

[12] *ibid.*

[13] M. I. ROSTOVZEF: *Dura-Europos and its Art*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938; B. A. BOON: *Roman Silchester*, London: Parrish, 1957; pp. 128-131.

[14] BOON: *op. cit.*, pp. 128-131.

[15] BOON: *op. cit*. (note 13), p. 129.

[16] E. T. BRIDGETT: *A History of the Holy Eucharist in Britain*, London: Burns & Oates, 1908; pp. 5 sq.

[17] BEDE, *A History of the English Church and People*, p. VIII.

Bridgett writes that Saint Augustine of Canterbury was able to use a Roman church dedicated to Saint Martin that still stood in the eastern part of the city. He also quotes Saint Gildas (500-570) who, in a sermon, castigates the behaviour of those who swear falsely on the altar: *Inter alia jurando demorantes, ac hæc eadem ac si lutulenta paulo post saxa despicientes*[18] . He compares the way these people treat the altar to the way one uses "dirty stones", instead of respecting it as the sacred place it should be.

The *Dictionary of Christian Antiquities*, already cited, mentions that in the high altar of the Lateran Basilica in Rome, there is a wooden altar that is believed to have been used originally by Saint Peter[19] . The age and nature of this relic would indeed make it very valuable. Fragments believed to be from a similar altar are also found in Santa Pudenziana in Rome[20] . These references to wooden altars found in ancient documents have led to the conclusion that such altars were commonly used[21] . However, other evidence indicates that stone altars were in use from at least the 4th century, and perhaps even much earlier. In his *De Christi Baptismate*, Opp. III 369, Gregory of Nyssa (330-395) says that the stone from which the altar is built is sanctified by consecration. St John Chrysostom (347-407) says much the same thing in his *Homily on I Corinthians*. The oldest known decree concerning the construction of stone altars is that of the Council of Epaono (Pamiers, France). Its 26th canon, promulgated in 517, prohibits the erection of altars other than those made of stone[22] . This type of legislation generally indicates that a considerable amount of time has already passed since the subject to which it refers became a well-established tradition. It is, in fact, the invariable practice of the Church.

The ancient custom of celebrating Mass on the tombs of martyrs can be traced back to at least the third century. The *arcosolia*, as they were called, were niches carved into the wall above a tomb, on which a slab of marble or other stone was placed. Sometimes it could also be a small room or chapel, with the tomb at a certain distance from the wall and the altar covered with a *mensa* of marble or other stone, as in the crypt of the Popes in the Catacomb of Saint Callixtus in Rome. *Arcosolia* also exist in catacombs other than those in Rome, particularly in those discovered beneath the convent of St. Agatha in Rabat (Malta). It seems that they were used more particularly during periods of persecution. Oratories have been discovered in the catacombs of Rome with traces of stone altars that stood in the centre of the apse, particularly in the catacombs of Saint Marcellus and Saint Priscilla. De Rossi, a leading specialist in Roman antiquities in the 19th century, discovered traces of four pillars that supported a stone altar in the catacombs of Saint Callixtus[23] . Although it has not been possible to date them accurately, they must certainly belong to a period no later than the 4th century. The famous fresco of the *Fractio panis* in the Capella Græce of the Catacombs of

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[18] *Ibid*., p. XXVI.

[19] BRIDGETT: *op. cit*. (note 15), p. 5.

[20] *Ibid*., p. 61. Other authors have taken up this point in their studies on altar materials.

[21] ATHANASIUS: *Ad Monachos*, Opp. I 847; OPTATUS OF MILEVE: *De Schismate Donatistorum* VI. 1, pp. 90 sq; AUGUSTINE: *Epist*. 185, c. 27.

[22] C. J. EFELE: *Histoire des Conciles* (translated by M. L'Abbé Delarc), vol. III, p. 289.

[23] *Dictionary of Christian Antiquities*, p. 62.

Saint Callixtus is located in an apse overlooking a small cavity which Monsignor Wilpert, himself an expert on the subject, discovered in 1896 , believed to contain the tomb of a martyr, above which a *mensa* for the celebration of Mass had been placed some time later[24] . But he was also convinced that the fresco itself, which dates from around 110 AD, depicted a celebration of Mass at that time. It shows a group of seven people around a tripod table[25] . In the *Liber pontificalis*, we read that Pope Felix I (269-274) *established supra sepulcra martyrum missas celebrari*[26] .

Other references to stone altars can be found, for example, in the works of Tertullian (born around 180), Origen (185–265) and Prudentius (348–404 or 406). In his *De Oratione*, Tertullian speaks of *the ara Dei* of Christians as opposed to pagan altars[27] . In his *Homily on the Book of Joshua*, Origen compares believers to living stones that Christ approves of and of which his altar may be composed[28] . This undoubtedly indicates that, in certain places, stone altars were used at that time to celebrate Mass. Prudence, a 4th-century Christian poet, speaks of *illa sacramenti donatrix mensa eadamque custos fida sui martyris apposita, servat ad æterni spem judicis ossa sepulcro pascit item sanctis tibricolas dapibus*[29] .

This practice of placing the altar *table* above the tombs of martyrs or saints may have been favoured or encouraged by this passage from Revelation: "I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God" (6:9). It is not impossible, moreover, that this verse itself is the very first evidence of a practice that already existed in certain places at the end of the first century. After all, in this final book of the New Testament – which experts believe was written between 70 and 95 – the theme of liturgy is very evident.

The custom of placing relics in or beneath the altar eventually led to the rule that every altar must contain one or more relics. We can trace this back to the 6th century at the earliest. However, from the beginning of the 4th century, we see the start of a vast movement to build and embellish churches throughout the Empire, led by Emperor Constantine himself and his mother Saint Helena. The writings of Eusebius, who lived during the reign of this emperor, are full of details and precise information about the consecration of churches[30] . In addition to the end of persecution, the increase in these solemn ceremonies undoubtedly contributed to the adoption in many churches—though clearly not all—of a more durable material for the construction of altars. We also know that Constantine and his mother Helena donated gold and silver altars to Roman basilicas. The shape of the altar had also changed, from a table to a tomb. In the Church of San Alessandro, located on Via Nomentana in Rome and dating from the 5th century, there is a 5th-century stone altar that is both a tomb and a table. It was this type of altar, more solid and tomb-shaped, that remained the most

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[24] *The Catholic Encyclopaedia*, vol. 19, p. 362.

[25] A. S. BARNES, *The Early Church in the Light of the Monuments*, London: Longmans & Green, 1913; p. 125.

[26] *Liber Pontificalis*, ed. L. DUCHESNE, I, p. 158.

[27] J. H. NEWMAN discusses this in his “Introduction” (p. 20) to his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*.

[28] ORIGEN, *Homily* 9, 1-2, *Sources chrétiennes* 71, pp. 244-246.

[29] *Ibid*.

[30] EUSEBIUS: *Historia Ecclesiastica*, X, I sq.

common until the mid-20th century. Although in many places altars were still made of wood, theological, spiritual and material developments led to the predominance of stone, marble or precious metals, which sometimes covered the original wood, rather than wood alone. While it is true that there were still a few wooden altars in the time of Charlemagne (742-814), after the 9th century there are hardly any traces of altars made solely of wood in the Latin Church[31] . Painted wood was sometimes used in churches in later periods, but the *mensa* always contained a stone with relics.

4. Conclusion

There is no doubt that, in the very beginning, the apostles and those they ordained celebrated Mass on wooden altar tables, which seems logical and understandable since they were following the practice established by the Lord Himself. Furthermore, the secret and intimate nature of the liturgy during those early decades made the use of these tables both acceptable and appropriate. However, after the middle of the second century, there was a clear change in the presentation of the Christian faith and greater confidence in the future, despite the ever-present possibility of persecution. The number of converts continued to grow, and the social position and material means of many of them made it possible to improve their material conditions to a certain extent. A distinguished scholar has clearly established that it would be completely wrong to imagine the early Christian community as completely destitute[32] . Numerous archaeological discoveries prove this to be the case. At the same time, the development of reflection on Old Testament theology and typology - particularly among authors such as Origen, Tertullian and, later, Augustine and Ambrose - led to a clearer identification of the altar of the Mass with that of the Temple sacrifice and with the other altars mentioned in the Bible. The Old Testament provides many details about altars used for sacrifice. In most cases, these are stone altars, with one notable exception: the altar of the Temple, described in the Book of Exodus (chap. 38), is made of acacia wood, but is plated with bronze. This was the altar of Solomon's Temple, which was itself built of wood. Later temples were made of stone. It is impossible that the importance of the Old Testament concept of sacrifice and its perfect fulfilment in the New Testament could have escaped a Christian community that sought to explain the depths of its faith and give it its full meaning. To fully understand these early centuries of Christian expansion, one must take into account this conviction that there was absolute continuity between the Old Testament and the New. Saint Irenaeus (140-c. 202) is one of the supreme examples of this kind of theological explanation[33] ; he used it very effectively to refute dangerous heresies. The evolution of the rituals of consecration and dedication of churches indicates that the Church was becoming increasingly aware of the sublime nature of the Mass and its ability to express the majesty of God through ritual and worship. This is an example of how doctrine and worship supported each

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[31] *The Catholic Encyclopaedia*, vol. 1, p. 363.

[32] Cf. BARNES: *op. cit*. (note 24), "Introduction" pp. XVII-XIX.

[33] *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. ROBERTS and RAMBAUT, 185, pp. 315-578.

other to promote a deeper understanding of theological concepts and preserve orthodoxy. It was the *lex orandi* reflecting the *lex credendi*, and vice versa.

Given this accumulation of evidence, it is hardly surprising that the Church switched to stone altars instead of wooden ones as soon as possible. We do not yet have solid archaeological evidence that such stone altars existed outside the catacombs before the 4th century. We are therefore reduced to assumptions and conjecture for the early centuries—between approximately 100 and 313 AD. Between two periods of persecution, Christians had the means and the time to settle in many places. But since most of the buildings they constructed at that time have either been destroyed or replaced by others, we cannot say with certainty whether the altars were made of stone or less durable materials. What we can say with certainty is that as soon as they were able to do so —that is, immediately after the Edict of Milan in 313—Christians began to build stone altars on a large scale and in many places. Legislation soon followed custom, making the erection of stone altars compulsory, which suggests that the tradition was already well established, although in some places wood continued to be used for several centuries. A comparison could be made with the principle of priestly celibacy, first decreed in the West by canon 33 of the Council of Elvira (305-306). This decree was subsequently renewed by several popes in the 4th century and beyond, yet it took several centuries for this precept to become universally established. The situation is somewhat similar with regard to stone altars. This question will continue to be studied: perhaps research and excavations will provide new evidence. Perhaps we will find the evidence we still lack, indicating the date when stone was first used in place of wood. In the meantime, we must content ourselves with knowing that the first disciples and their successors, for several generations, celebrated Mass on wooden tables. They never had the slightest doubt about the true nature of what they were doing. For many, besides the fact that wood was the material of the table that the Lord Himself had used, it also recalled the wood of the Cross. In the symbolism of Christian sacrifice, the Cross of Our Lord was itself the first altar on which He offered Himself in obedience to the Father. His sacrifice was the perfect sacrifice, which fulfilled all others. The dichotomy that our era makes between wooden altars, bearing the symbolism *of agape*, and stone altars, expressing the sacrificial aspect, was of no interest to the early Church: true Christianity never had the slightest doubt about the meaning and purpose of the Eucharist; but it is also true that, as on other points of doctrine, the Church has, over time, deepened its understanding of the matter. Constantly enlightened by the Holy Spirit ever present within her, the Church has gradually made the transition from wood to stone. It was a tangible and visible link to the great spiritual heritage of God's chosen people and a symbol of the unique sacrifice, a clear and unambiguous declaration of her understanding of the supreme offering of Calvary, associated with the Last Supper, of which the Mass is the permanent and complete re-presentation until the end of time.