

The rites of consecration of the altar

*Hervé Courau*¹

The consecration of altars is the most important part of the dedication of a church. The liturgy aims to give glory to God and sanctify mankind. On this occasion, it embraces the whole of creation, in the material elements found both in the stone of the altar and in the sacramentals applied to it in this function (water, oil, but also salt, ashes and wine), in order to offer it to God. Creation seems to have come together here, as does the history of the Church: the rites of dedication appeared at the end of the era of persecution and experienced a marvellous crescendo, suggestive of the entire history of the Liturgy. Let us describe this development by taking a few samples in space—around the Mediterranean basin—and then in time, from the 8th century to the present day; a final section will seek to illustrate this study by describing recent cases of consecration.

1. Influences from the 4th to the 8th century around the Mediterranean basin: the formation of the ritual

In the aftermath of the peace of the Church in 313, Eusebius describes an extraordinary liturgical boom in his *Ecclesiastical History*, the most spectacular aspect of which concerns the dedication of churches². There was a great deal of construction at that time, and the dedication of places of worship became a symbol of society's official recognition of the Christian religion: liturgy became a public event. At the end of his work, Eusebius leaves his reader with this perspective. He emphasises the large number of bishops who took part in these dedications, as well as the triumphal aspect of the ceremonies, symbolic of the triumph of the Church itself after its great trial. Everywhere, at the instigation of Emperor Constantine, writes Eusebius, "temples of magnificent proportions sprang up from the ground, displaying the richness of their construction in broad daylight. Everyone could finally witness the long-awaited spectacle of the dedication of churches in all the cities recently provided with Christian religious buildings and take part in the consecration of the newly built oratories"³.

Eusebius' literary work has the merit of bringing together all the memories of previous centuries. Admittedly, the author does so in a haphazard manner and without much critical concern; therefore, it is wise to read it with caution. But when it comes to Constantinian liturgy, he speaks as a direct witness, and we can therefore believe him without hesitation, simply taking into account the ardour of his Eastern temperament. Eusebius concludes his vast work with a description of the consecration of the cathedral of Tyre, where his friend Paulinus was bishop, "the most beautiful in

¹ Lecture given at the 3rd CIEL Colloquium in Versailles, October 1997.

² EUSEBIUS OF CAESAREA: *Ecclesiastical History*, I, X, c. II to IV, Sources chrétiennes (S.C.) no. 55 pp. 79-104.

³ EUSEBIUS OF CAESAREA: *Ecclesiastical History*, X, IV, 2 and 3, S.C. 55 pp. 79-81.

all Phoenicia"⁴ , he says. This took place in 314. He also describes the consecration of the Constantinian Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which took place in 335. The Spanish pilgrim Eteria tells us that, most likely in 384, the dedications in Jerusalem took place on the anniversary of the Invention of the Holy Cross⁵ . These snippets of information give us a glimpse of the enthusiasm of those days: despite the serious concerns caused by the Arian quarrels, all hearts were united and thrilled at the memory of these great liturgical ceremonies.

Eusebius shares with us these feelings of extraordinary fervour, but on the other hand he does not go into any detail about the rites themselves. The fact of the consecration is simply attested to, linked to the social function of the liturgy finally recognised publicly; this last point seems to me to have been overlooked. Due to a lack of information, it is often concluded today that the consecration of an altar was limited to the celebration of Holy Mass. In fact, Pope Vigilius alludes to this view, as does a decretal attributed to Pope Evaristus⁶ . But is not the essential point noted by Eusebius simply the taking possession of a place, of an altar, just as the pontiff's entrance at the beginning of a liturgical function is still the moment of highest solemnity opening the way to the ineffable mystery? Against this background, which seems to me to be the essential point to remember, the influence of the ancient rites of the Temple of Jerusalem adapted to the new cult must have appeared very early on in the East. The sprinkling of lustral water and the multiplicity of outdoor and indoor processions, which seem to be taken straight from the Books of Numbers, Kings or Ezra, appear in Gaul in the earliest manuscript evidence as undeniably linked to Eastern influences⁷ .

We change scenery and move to the Latin West. In June 386, Saint Ambrose of Milan recounts, in a famous letter to his sister Marceline⁸ , his recent discovery of the tomb of the holy martyrs Gervasius and Protasius. The enthusiastic faithful insisted on keeping vigil over their sacred remains for several nights in a row in the nearest church, the Basilica of Fausta. Then the Bishop of Milan solemnly brought them into the recently built basilica, which would later be called San Ambrogio Maggiore; The procession, conducted with great pomp, ended with the burial of the relics under the altar. It was like a new burial, but in an atmosphere of extraordinary joy and with the assurance of faith that the past sufferings of the martyrs had earned the Church the peace it was beginning to enjoy, and even a certain glory, anticipating that which awaited it in heaven. The atmosphere described by Eusebius is thus reflected here in the writings of the Bishop of Milan, but with a new reference to the relics. Saint Ambrose also notes the wonderful appropriateness of uniting the sacrifice of the martyrs with that of Christ; he seems to echo several passages from

⁴ EUSEBIUS OF CAESAREA: *Ecclesiastical History*, op. cit. X, IV, 1, S.C. 55 p.81.

⁵ EGERIA (or Etheria): *Travel Journal*, Itinerary, 48, 2; SC 296, p. 317ff. On the dating of her journey, see pp. 27-33.

⁶ VIGILIUS: *Epist.* 1, 4; P.L. 69, 18. Cf. A.G. MARTIMORT: *L'Eglise en prière*, Paris: Declée, 1984, vol. 1 p. 225 with notes 187 and 188.

⁷ *Dictionary of Christian Archaeology and Liturgy* (D.A.C.L.), article "Dedication" by P. de PUNIET, col. 392. MARTIMORT, op. cit., pp. 224, 226–227. Num. 19; 1 Kings 7; Ezra 3.

⁸ AMBROSE OF MILAN, *Letter 22*, quoted in *Maison-Dieu* 70 (1962), p. 140 ff.; cf. M. ANDRIEU: *Les Ordines Romani du Haut Moyen-Age*, vol. IV Louvain: Spicilegium sacrum lovaniense, 1956, p. 367-368.

Revelation⁹ ; one is also reminded of the contemporaries of Saint Polycarp's martyrdom¹⁰ , who were so eager to possess the remains of the old martyred bishop, but indignant at the suspicion cast on them by Jews and pagans regarding the purpose of their request.

Milan is obviously within Rome's sphere of influence. But customs here are not simply copied from one place to another. And we would probably have to look to the East for the origin of a transfer of relics as described by Saint Ambrose. The importance of the bodies of martyrs in Christian worship is nevertheless an achievement of Rome, and this component will remain throughout the centuries, except that for a very long time Rome was scrupulous about moving the bodies of the deceased and, *a fortiori*, dividing them¹¹ . Thus, the construction of the altar in Rome was often carried out on the martyrs' own tombs, outside the city walls. The consecration of the altar was equivalent to a new burial, and the entire building was then considered a large reliquary. This was the case for the basilicas dedicated to St. Peter in the Vatican, St. Paul on the Via Ostiensi, and St. Lawrence Outside the Walls. However, it is worth noting the examples of Saint Mary Major around the relic of the manger, *ad præsepe*, and Holy Cross in Jerusalem, when the piety of Helena and Constantine enriched Rome with relics from the Holy Land. With reference to these Roman models, St Peter's and St Paul's Outside the Walls, as well as St Mary Major and Holy Cross in Jerusalem, every Christian church is designed as an extension of the *confessio* of the martyrs, possibly of the tomb on which they are sometimes built, and beyond that, an extension of the great deeds that remind us of our salvation.

It should be noted that very early on, the range of relics that could be included in the altar expanded considerably: cloths used to transport the bodies of martyred saints, and vials of oil that had burned near their bodies served as objects of devotion to the saints, or rather to the Lord himself, according to the classic reflex of the witnesses to the martyrdom of Saint Polycarp mentioned above. Saint Ambrose himself consecrated the Basilica Romana in Milan before 386 with *pignora* from the holy apostles Peter and Paul, that is, cloths that had touched their bones mixed here with the bones of other martyrs, and therefore not of Roman origin. The same can be seen in the Roman basilica built by Rufinus at Chêne, near Chalcedon, in 394. An inscription from 359 in Africa mentions the presence of relics of local martyrs with wood from the Holy Cross, earth from Bethlehem and *pignora* from the holy Apostles. These fabrics, made precious by their contact with the relics, are called *brandea* (or sometimes *sanctuaria*, for example, in a letter from Pope Vigilius). Thus, they in turn become the vehicle of devotion to them.

A famous letter from Saint Gregory is worth mentioning here. Empress Constantia had asked him to transfer the heads of Saints Peter and Paul (no less!) to Byzantium. In his reply, the holy Pope justified his refusal by referring to the long-established custom in Rome of not violating

⁹ For example, the passages retained by the current rite: Rev 6:9-11; 7:9; 8:3; 21:3-5 and 21-25.

¹⁰ *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, XVII and XVIII, S.C. 10 pp. 230-233: "They did not know that we could never abandon Christ, who suffered for the salvation of all those who are saved in the world, nor worship another. We worship him because he is the Son of God; as for the martyrs, we love them as disciples and imitators of the Lord."

¹¹ MARTIMORT, *op. cit.*, p. 226. Rome long resisted the rapidly spreading practice of dividing the bones of martyrs. But on the other hand, it goes without saying that, according to the formula of the ancient Gelasius, "where a relic is venerated, there the whole body is supposed to be present".

graves. So that devotion to relics would not be hindered, a very simple solution had been found, in keeping with the strong faith of the time, which was to transfer the respect due to the sacred bones to anything that had come into contact with them. Such is the origin of these fabrics called *Brandea*, placed with respect in pyxes (originally boxwood boxes): "Rome does not have the custom of giving relics of saints, in order to respect the integrity of the bodies; but only a piece of cloth is sent in a pyx so that it may touch the most holy relics. Brought to the church to be consecrated, it is included there with great veneration, and miracles abound as if the bodies of the saints themselves had been brought there"¹². As proof of his words, Saint Gregory attests that blood had spurted from *the brandea* cut by scissors to be multiplied, which emphasised their spiritual connection with the power of the martyrs.

“You are God's house; your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit”¹³. These statements by Saint Paul led to a completely different liturgical practice in Gaul concerning the rite of consecration of the altar and the Christian temple. Saint Caesarius of Arles contributed greatly to this in the 5th century through his use of these Pauline formulas¹⁴, before Saint Yves of Chartres gave it a complete liturgical form at the beginning of the 12th century¹⁵: he does not shy away from emphasising the analogies between the ceremony of consecrating an altar and a church and the rites of Christian initiation, i.e. the three sacraments of baptism, confirmation and the Eucharist: the purification and sprinkling of the altar, which suggest the baptism of the faithful; the anointing of the altar, extended to the walls with holy chrism, parallels the anointing of confirmation, before the celebration of the Eucharistic mystery consecrating the altar to the Blessed Sacrament, which has always been considered the source and summit of the whole life of the Church¹⁶.

¹² SAINT GREGORY THE GREAT, Lib. IV, Indict. XII, *Epist XXX ad Constantiam Augustam*, P.L. LXXVII, col. 701-702: “It is not customary among the Romans, when they give the relics of saints, to presume to touch anything of the body, but only a small piece is placed in a pyx and the sacred bodies of the saints are placed in the sacraments. Quod /evatum in ecclesia, quæ est dadicanda, debita cum veneratione reconditur, et tantæ per hac ibidem virtutes fiuat, ac si illum specialiter eorum corpora deferantur”. See also D.A.C.L., article "Brandeam", by H. LECLERCQ; and article "Dédicace", *cit.*, col. 382sq. *L'Eglise en prière*, A.G. MARTIMORT, new edition 1984, vol. I, p. 226. Note f of the *Patrologie Latine* (P.L. LXXVII, col. 701sq) also mentions exceptions to Roman custom, which began to multiply under St. Gregory. The Lombard invasions hastened the movement, forcing the transfer of many saints' bodies within the city walls. Cemeteries (extra *Urbem*) were no longer safe places, so the churches of the city gradually offered protective asylum to those who protected the militant Church in its tribulations. Rome thus accepted the Eastern practice around the 7th century by force of circumstance. A silver ball was found in Milan with its contents intact, containing *brandea* and the bones of martyrs - not of Roman origin - offered by Rome. Here, the Roman practice is juxtaposed with that of northern Italy and Gaul, which came from the East. The silver ball is kept in the treasury of Milan Cathedral (see also our note 18). The way in which Russians still venerate the relics of a saint today – and more than ever since 1989 – bears witness to the ancient respect found in *brandea*: after many prostrations, the faithful kiss the veil covering the cloth covering a box containing the pyx of bones! The multiplicity of intermediaries is pierced by the simple faith of the faithful: one can guess at the depths of the notion of the sacred.

¹³ Eph 2:19; 1 Cor 6:15, cf. 3:17.

¹⁴ P.L. 39, 2166.

¹⁵ P.L. 162, 527–536. Saint Yves was born in Chartres in 1040, studied at Le Bec under Lanfranc, then in Paris from 1060 onwards. Bishop of Chartres in 1090 and consecrated by Urban II due to the refusal of the Archbishop of Sens to recognise him, he had the courage to oppose the king's remarriage, which led to his exile for twelve years. At diocesan synods, this great bishop spoke of the liturgy as the confessor of the faith that he was: he readily turned to the Fathers to clarify the law on sacraments.

¹⁶ *Lumen gentium* n°11; *Christus Dominus* n°30; *Presbyterorum Ordinis* n°2 and 5; *Ad Gentes* n°15.

Of course, we should not exaggerate and claim that the consecration of the altar in Rome is due to its connection with bodies, then with the relics of saints, and in Gaul to purification and anointing. We can guess at this division of functions from the sacramentaries¹⁷. The liturgical culture of our time is facilitated by the abundance of sources that are now accessible (or almost), but on the other hand—and this is too little noticed—it is hampered by the systematic approach inherited from centuries of idealism, from which we are slowly and with difficulty emerging. To be satisfied with clear ideas is to do violence to the delicate complexity of customs that have varied over time and according to place¹⁸. We must therefore avoid hardening the nuances that are more or less common to all authentic liturgy into opposition. Saint Leo, for example, in his Sermon 97 for the anniversary of a dedication, already and fortunately combines the two points of view, emphasising in turn Christian initiation and the importance of relics in relation to the altar. He emphasises in turn the joy brought by the presence of the relics honoured in the altar and, in imitation of them, the spiritual struggle necessary for Christians, who are temples of God¹⁹.

Nevertheless, here, as in the rest of the liturgical heritage, the Romano-Frankish liturgy provided an opportunity for these two fairly distinct traditions to merge during the Carolingian Renaissance. From the 7th century onwards, Gaul adopted Roman customs through the Gelasian sacramentary, alongside the old Gallican books. This marked the beginning of a period in which Gaul used books that it believed to be purely Roman, but which were in fact already hybrid; these rites included the purification of the altar, which St. Gregory reserved for cases where a pagan temple had been converted into a church, but which was also found in the East, in the Byzantine, Armenian, Syriac and Cappadocian traditions. This gradual fusion contributed to making the ceremony of altar consecration one of the most opulent liturgical functions. We must now study how it unfolded according to the various liturgical books that reflect the Church's practice in this area, from the 8th century to the present day.

¹⁷ See D.A.C.L., article "Dedication," col. 390 ff.: until the sixth century, there is no mention of anointing in the Roman forms. "The entire ceremony in *the Ordo*, as in the sacramentary, is centred around the procession of the relics and their deposition in the altar."

¹⁸ D.A.C.L., article "Dedication", col. 392. Cf. the symptomatic testimony of St. Gregory the Great instructing St. Augustine of Canterbury on how to convert pagan temples into churches: *Aqua benedicta fiat, in eisdem fanis aspergatur, altaria construantur, reliquiæ ponantur...* - Let water be blessed, so that it may be sprinkled on pagan places; let altars be raised and relics be buried there..." - P.L. LXXVII, Lib. XI, Indict. IV, Epist LXXVI *Ad Mellitum Abbatem*, col. 1215. Here, the mention of relics most likely refers to *brandea*. We note that the essence of the dedication rite, common to both the East and the West, is thus clearly emphasised in a manner that is already fused.

¹⁹ LEO THE GREAT: *Sermons* t IV, S.C. 200, p. 287 ff. See note 1, p. 286 ff. This refers to the consecration of the church dedicated to the seven Maccabean brothers, which was performed by Sixtus III, the immediate predecessor of Saint Leo. The church later changed its name when the relics of St. Peter's chains were brought there: St. Peter in Chains. This is probably the first case in Rome where the use of bone fragments is mentioned. As has already been said, the custom of the city had opposed this until then and would continue to do so for a long time to come, but in this case it was a gift from the East: a beautiful symbol of an ancient, eminently liturgical custom, understood in two different ways in Rome and in the East with regard to the fragmentation of the bodies of saints. We can guess at the theology of the body underlying this fact: the body of the martyr, "pulverised" in the glory of God and associated with the holy sacrifice, imposes Christian seriousness on the faithful of today and beyond. Before Saint Gregory, only churches *outside the city walls* could benefit from the presence of the bodies of martyrs when they were built on their tombs. But the cathedral church of the Lateran itself, like the other churches *intra muros Urbis*, had to content itself with *brandia* - only the Liberian basilica, Saint Mary Major, also had the relics of the manger.

3. Description of the ritual from the 8th century to the present day

Following the new edition of *L'Eglise en prière* by Mgr Martimort²⁰, let us describe the major phases in the liturgical development of the consecration of an altar, starting in the 8th century. But here, I would also like to refer to Andrieu's remarkable introductions to his *Ordines romani de la dédicace*²¹, as well as Mario Righetti's *storia liturgica*²², and, with regard to the study of sources in Frankish sacramentaries (those of Gellone and Angoulême), *Enkainia*, the commemorative volume of the dedication of the abbey church of Maria Laach²³. First, we will describe the Gallo-Frankish liturgy, influenced by the Gelasian mentioned above; then we will visit Byzantium in the Early Middle Ages, before looking at the Roman liturgy of the consecration of the altar in the same period. This will provide a better understanding of the splendour of consecration from the 11th century to the present day: in the Roman-German pontifical, then in the 1595 ritual, which emerged from the Council of Trent and incorporated many of Durand de Mende's arrangements, and finally in the two recent rituals of 1961 and 1977.

In this first Gallo-Frankish liturgy described by Gelasius of Angoulême at the beginning of the 8th century, the purification and anointing of the altar preceded the deposition of the relics. The pontiff blessed a mixture of water and wine to sprinkle on the building and the altar; then he pronounced a lengthy blessing over it, proceeded to anoint the altar five times with holy chrism, and blessed the altar cloths and sacred vessels. Once the altar was adorned and lit, the people entered with the procession of relics; these were placed in the altar and the bishop celebrated Mass. A few years later, numerous rites were added to this fairly simple framework, rites concerning the building rather than the altar²⁴.

The anointing of the altar has been attested in Byzantine liturgy since the 6th century (in Syria since the 4th century). In Byzantium in the 8th century, the liturgy took place over two days. On the first day, the clergy alone performed the purification of the altar²⁵, the anointing with chrism or *myron*, the decoration of the altar with cloths, and while another bishop anointed the walls and columns, the pontiff incensed the altar at length and concluded with a solemn prayer. Nevertheless, such a list cannot convey the degree of solemnity involved in these rites: for the purification of the altar, one begins by sprinkling saltpetre in the shape of a cross, blessing the water and sprinkling it three times on the altar as in baptism; then the table and its columns are washed and dried with a linen cloth. In the current Byzantine rite, there is also a triple infusion of wine, followed by the rinsing and drying of the altar with a cloth while the *Miserere* psalm is sung; this cloth is then used to make the *antimension*, the corporal typical of the Byzantine rite with its incorporated relics,

²⁰ MARTIMORT, *op. cit.*, pp. 223-234 (P. JOUNEL).

²¹ ANDRIEU, *op. cit.*

²² M. RIGHETTI, *Storia liturgica*, vol. IV, Rome: Ancora, 1966, pp. 512-523, especially pp. 515-521.

²³ SUITBERT BENZ, OSB: "Zur Geschichte der rom. Kirchweibe nach den Texten des VI-VII Jhdts", in *Enkainia* (Festschrift zur Weihe des Abteikirche Maria Laach), Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1956, pp. 62-106.

²⁴ *Gelasien d'Angouleme*, ed. Cagin, 1919, no. 2020. *Ordo Romanus* 41 (ANDRIEU, *op. cit.*, pp. 337-347).

²⁵ MARTIMORT (*op. cit.* p. 227) notes here, seemingly by mistake, the use of "baptismal water": baptismal water is always consecrated solely for this sacrament.

which then serves as a portable altar²⁶. The second day is reserved for the relics. The people, who watch over them, join in their translation. They receive the anointing of chrism before being sealed by the pontiff in the tomb. He then celebrates the "Divine Liturgy". The only altar in the Byzantine church can only be consecrated during the dedication²⁷.

The study of consecration in the Coptic rite benefits from an article published in 1964 in *Orient Syriac*²⁸. It compares this rite with its Syrian and Byzantine counterparts. Egypt has a very simple structure, and I believe that these descriptions could be extended to the Armenian rite. Here, the solemnity is simply linked to the prolixity of the readings and chants that accompany the service, which is a symptom of a liturgy designed in a monastic environment. But when it comes to the consecration of the altar itself, everything ultimately boils down to a simple and airy function: an offering of incense, with the singing of Psalms 22 and 23; then a long *ektenia*, those diaconal litanies that so disconcert us hurried and analytical Westerners; During this litany, the pontiff offers incense again, anoints the altar and its board – or *tablit* – which the Copts use even on a fixed altar and consecrate like the portable altar of the Latins; then he recites a prayer. After *the ektenia* and these liturgical gestures, three prayers are recited, the second of which, the consecratory prayer, invokes the descent of the Holy Spirit; the people respond "*amen*" to the many attributes introduced in these prayers. This is followed by three more signings with *myron* and an adapted formula, then an anointing of the entire altar table while reciting *alleluias* and psalm verses.

One senses that these provisions fascinate today's liturgists to varying degrees. The simplicity of the rites, the participation of the faithful, everything is designed to appeal, and it is believed—too readily, I think—that such a rite would be more accessible to our mindsets. In fact, the new *Ordo* of 1977 would more or less boil down to a pattern similar to the one we have just described, in the event—as anticipated—that there were no relics to be buried. As for the veneration of relics among the Copts or Syrians, however, there is much to be said; the question for the Armenians and Chaldeans is more obscure. Relics are used in the holy liturgy, but in the Byzantine *antimension* I mentioned a moment ago. Other Eastern rites also have portable altars, but without

²⁶ D.A.C.L., article "Antimension", vol. 1 col. 2319-2326; cf. especially col. 2325. Here we find a typical example of the consequences of iconoclasm that went beyond the strict framework of icons. The principle that prevailed at the time was this: since the Incarnation, man's relationship with creation in his search for the Creator has changed: the holy image, far from being a screen, becomes a means of reaching God; the same is true of the material elements touched by the holy mysteries: here, the antimension, which was originally just the cloth used to wipe the holy altar, became an extension of the altar itself, equivalent to our Western portable altar. Since that time in the East, the realism of the liturgy has undergone a remarkable amplification, the exact origin of which remains largely unknown. The current rite of consecration of an altar in the Byzantine rite, where it is observed, has remained virtually unchanged since the 8th century in terms of its content. In March 1995, a parish church in the United States was consecrated in full accordance with this rite - except that the outdoor procession was omitted because the church had been reserved for worship for many years and the ceremony took place on the same day. Much of the information in this lecture on Eastern liturgy comes from the person who was the parish priest at the time.

²⁷ STEFANO PARENTE and ELENA VELKOVSKA: *L'Euclologio Barberini* Gr 336, sec VII1; B.E.L. Subsidia 80, Rome 1995. French translation of the relevant sections in *La Maison-Dieu* 70 (1962), pp. 135-140 (with introduction pp. 131-134, by André K. FYRILLAS). The 8th-century *Codex Barberini* 336 is the earliest manuscript document of the Byzantine liturgy and comes from southern Italy. It describes the liturgy of Byzantium, with many Syrian, Palestinian and Egyptian elements, in addition to local customs. This document attests to a date after iconoclasm, but it is also a valuable witness to elements prior to the crisis that had such an impact on the life of the Church in the East.

²⁸ R. COQUIN, "The Consecration of Churches in the Coptic Rite; Its Relations with the Syrian and Byzantine Rites," in *L'Orient Syrien* 9 (1964), pp. 149-187; cf. p. 156.

relics: there is the wooden *tablithô*, which the Syriacs still use on the consecrated altar itself, the *tabot* of the Ethiopians (made of stone or wood), the *tablit* of the Copts (often made of wood) and the *vêm* of the Armenians (the latter is always made of stone). The fact remains that the cult of relics is deeply rooted among both the Copts and the rest of the East²⁹ .

In any case, let us not delude ourselves: we are Romans. *The Roman Ordo* 42 describes the pure Roman tradition in that same 8th century. Everything is now focused on the burial of relics. Nevertheless, some Frankish and Eastern influences are beginning to appear. Thus, a first litany is sung in the church where the relics are kept; these are placed and carried by the bishop himself³⁰ (as with the Byzantines), and on a paten, which—incidentally—indicates the small size of the relics; let us remember what we said about *the pignora*. The procession stops in front of the church; only the clergy enter. The bishop blesses the water and pours chrism into it to make the cement that will seal the tomb. He then "baptises" the altar with holy water and goes outside for the singing of a second litany, then a third, to solemnise the entrance of the people. The relics are laid to rest, and the tomb is anointed at the four corners with chrism before the relics are placed inside with three pieces of the Lord's body and three grains of incense. A new anointing takes place after the sealing, then the altar is adorned and Mass finally begins³¹ . The amalgamation of Roman and Frankish traditions, and through the latter, Eastern influence, is therefore already evident in this *Ordo* 42. The 10th-century Roman-Germanic pontifical will retain each of these elements, but multiplied. It is this that we must now describe.

The Roman-German pontifical actually contains two ceremonials for our function, the first being merely a fusion of *Ordo* 41 and *Ordo* 42, and the second adding developments to the previous text. We can easily recognise the main points already described. The water is blessed with salt at the end of a first litany sung in the church where the relics are kept. I will skip over the amplifications that solemnise the entrance into the church, except to note that this highly solemn taking of possession emphasises the importance of both the altar and the temple. The Apocalypse transfers the importance of heavenly worship to the Lamb and God himself, who becomes the dwelling place of his people: the temple disappears³² . The Christian altar, here, anticipates heaven: everything converges towards it in our temples, which are merely the reliquary, the setting for the presence of the Lord through the altar.

After the entrance, the pontiff blesses new water mixed with salt, ashes and wine. This water, which later custom would call "Gregorian water", attests to various influences, including

²⁹ The old German classic devoted to the Christian altar, *Der Christliche Altar*, by JOSEF BRAUN, SJ, vols. 1-11, Munich (1924), emphasises the devotion to relics among the Syriacs and Copts. It cites evidence of relics found in Syriac churches under the altar, indicating that the sanctuary is considered the normal place for their deposition. Coptic churches often have a niche behind the altar in the vertical wall, probably reserved for the deposition of relics. Muslim invasions certainly contributed to changing these practices, and the deposition of relics has in fact disappeared among the Copts and Syriacs.

³⁰ ANDRIEU, *op. cit.*, OR 4, p. 385.

³¹ ANDRIEU, *op. cit.*, OR 4, p. 397.

³² Rev 21:23 ff. "I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple."

Byzantine³³ ; the ashes appear to come from an Irish custom, which, in this area, is often a sign of Syriac influence. The altar is marked in the centre and at the four corners, before the entire building is sprinkled. As in *the* previous *Ordo*, after the solemn prayer of consecration, the pontiff prepares and blesses the cement that will be used to cement the tomb. Then come the anointings, also in the centre and at the four corners with the oil of catechumens, followed by incense. These anointings and incense are repeated before all the oil is poured onto the altar table and before the anointings with holy chrism. From then on, a priest continues to incense the altar. The preface of the consecration of the altar is then sung after the anointing of the walls, and the vessels, tablecloths and sacred vestments are blessed.

The second part can then take place with the procession of the relics in the presence of all the people; but their burial takes place out of sight of the faithful, behind a stretched veil: the four corners, this time of the tomb, are anointed before the deposition of the relics, to which are added, here again, the three pieces of Christ's body and the three grains of incense. The lid itself is carefully anointed on both its inner and outer sides, before and after sealing. The deacon adorns the altar with its cloth, the bishop makes a final offering of incense and then withdraws to the sacristy. The church is then decorated, the candles are lit and Mass is celebrated according to the usual rite.

The Roman pontifical of 1595, resulting from the conciliar reform of Trent, merely endorsed the changes that Durand de Mende had recommended at the end of the 13th century. The procession departs from the church where the relics have been kept, but without them. The triple external purification of the church—the lower part of the walls, the upper part of the walls, and the middle part—precedes the solemn entrance, as if the clergy alone were taking possession. The clergy then joins the faithful who have continued to watch over the relics, and the procession sets off and enters the church after a monition. The rest of the service is a carbon copy of the one just described: deposition of the relics, incensing and anointing of the altar, before its vesting and Holy Mass. Durand de Mende introduced just a few new formulas, some of which are of Spanish origin, and the wonderfully evocative chant of *the Dirigatur* during the incensing of the altar. We also owe him an *Ordo* containing only the consecration of the altar independently of a church dedication, which is a novelty.

Pius XII decided on a simplified edition of this ritual in order to make it more accessible to the piety of our times, which, it must be humbly noted, is becoming less youthful and less vigorous. John XXIII promulgated this new *Ordo* in 1961. The editors contented themselves with removing repetitions and reducing symbolic gestures. "Rationality has prevailed over poetry," remarks Mgr Martimort, not without regret. A characteristic indication: the section concerning the anointing of the altar table stipulates that the holy chrism should be poured very sparingly, whereas the ancient custom was to spread it over the entire table. Here is the text of the 1961 section: "The pontiff dips the thumb of his right hand into the holy chrism and makes the sign of the cross on the altar table five times"³⁴ .

³³ *La maison Dieu* 63 (1960), pp. 89 and 90. ANDRIEU, *op. cit.*, OR 4, pp. 323 and 339-347.

³⁴ *Ordo* 1961, no. 24.

The new post-conciliar Roman *Ordo* for the consecration of an altar dates from 1977; it represents one of the last phases of the ongoing reform and one of the last liturgical acts of Paul VI's pontificate³⁵. The years that separate us from this reform often and increasingly incline us towards severity. But here the dual Roman and Frankish influence can still be seen very clearly. The 1961 reform had already relaxed what had become inaccessible to most concrete cases of altar consecration. The 1977 ritual merely added this characteristic flexibility, which is intended by the current law in this matter; it corresponds, I believe, to the spirit of the conciliar reform, which seeks to adapt the richness of the great tradition that honours the Latin Church to the varied circumstances it encounters. Thus, for example, in the area that interests me here, the lesser sacramentals of the blessing of the building or the altar have been provided for, either as a provisional version pending a true consecration, or as a definitive version, but one that is modest and also more accessible.

Intentionally, the dedication of a church and the consecration of an altar are planned to be included within the Holy Mass itself. The entrance procession is optional, the rites of taking possession of the church can be greatly simplified and are concluded by the sprinkling of the faithful, a pale legacy of the purification of the altar and the pavement. This is followed by the singing of *the Gloria* and the collection, then the liturgy of the Word. The expressive rites of consecration described in the previous rites take place after the Gospel and the homily, but according to a slightly different plan: in the 1977 ritual, the relics are sealed before the anointing of the altar, as is now done among the Eastern Byzantines; the anointing therefore immediately precedes the vesting of the altar and its illumination, which is very aptly emphasised and enriched. The Eucharistic liturgy then continues with the Offertory.

The aim is for each community to derive the greatest spiritual benefit from participation in a way that is appropriate to it³⁶. Moreover, more than anywhere else in the new liturgical books, the multiplicity of cases provided for and the consequent adaptations invite such modulated applications³⁷. Furthermore, when compared with the 1961 ritual, we note a return to certain traditional gestures. Here is an example: *the 1961 Ordo*, as we have said, had reduced the anointing with holy chrism to a fivefold sign of the cross with the thumb; but only sixteen years later, the new rubric quite spontaneously returns to the more traditional meaning of full anointing: *sacrum chrisma effundit, quo laudabiliter totam mensam linit*³⁸.

These various remarks lead us to the following conclusion regarding our concern here: the recent liturgical reform may well achieve its goal quite spontaneously and without difficulty. On the one hand, the Roman authorities who renewed the ritual in 1961 were already responding, to a large extent, to the real concern posed by the richness of the previous ritual, a richness such that it

³⁵ *Decretum Dedicacionis Ecclesiae*, from the Sacred Congregation for the Sacraments and Divine Worship, 29 May 1977.

³⁶ See *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, nos. 37 to 40 – cf. nos. 14, 114, 124.

³⁷ Canon 846 of *the Codex Juris Canonici* (1983) ensures conformity with the liturgical books approved by the competent authority. See also canon 838, which defines the various authorities involved in the ordering of the sacred liturgy.

³⁸ *Ordo* 1977, no. 49.

became dissuasive, except in the case of communities that were exceptionally well endowed, at least in terms of personnel. On the other hand, the rarity of these functions made them less susceptible to the complex influences that were given too free rein in other, more frequented areas of the liturgy.

I am speaking freely here, in the confidence of a gathering of friends, but also with the secret desire to find, tentatively, a solution to painfully complex situations. Certain indications suggest, not that we should relativise, but at least that we should relax the scope of the liturgical law of recent years in this area. Moreover, Father Evenou's commentary on the new ritual of dedication in *La Maison-Dieu* suggests that many rites that disappeared from the 1977 ritual could be revived where the faithful would be sensitive to their significance³⁹. The great liturgical tradition, here as elsewhere, could then be considered as a quarry that is always open, from which materials suitable for such a function can be extracted. But obviously this requires those who would have to make such choices to engage in docile and trusting consultation with the authorities, and this broadening of the interpretation of the new books should only be accepted in the sense of a return to the source, to the roots, to the tradition which in the liturgy has always had great power to establish the value of the norm⁴⁰.

4. Recent illustrations of altar consecrations

Some may find the mention of such functions rather disembodied: most of the faithful have never seen them. Yet many altars have been consecrated in our time: altars linked to post-war reconstruction, as well as those in large recent shrines: I am thinking, for example, of the basilica dedicated to Saint Pius X in Lourdes, consecrated by Cardinal Roncalli a few months before he became John XXIII. This function made a strong impression on him shortly before he promulgated *the Ordo* of 1961; closer to our own time, John Paul II consecrated the basilica of Yamoussouko. Finally, there are the altars linked to liturgical reform: altars facing the people have become tiresome in their provisional form; the effort of building a permanent structure often ends with consecration. I must say that, especially when it comes to cathedral churches, these celebrations sometimes make people uncomfortable, as they are reminiscent of the consecration of a break; the liturgy then has little to do with the pomp and circumstance that enthused Eusebius or the people of Milan. If it has not already done so, only time will reveal the intention and spiritual fruitfulness of such liturgical acts.

³⁹ EVENOU, "Le nouveau rituel de la Dédicace" [*The New Ritual of Dedication*], in *La maison Dieu* 134 (1978), pp. 85-105; see especially p. 96.

⁴⁰ Nos. 37 to 40 of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* concern the adaptation of the liturgy in situations where it is more difficult to accept the dominant culture. This is the famous and crucial problem of "inculturation". Shouldn't we also consider the opposite case of adapting the books resulting from the reform to the previous books, where the latter are still perceived as being well centred on the main principles described at the beginning of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (nos. 5 to 13)? To help with this, we should attempt a comparative study of the two documents of the Holy Father dated 2 July 1988 (*Motu Proprio, Ecclesia Dei adflicta*) and 4 December of the same year for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the conciliar Constitution on the liturgy. No. 16 of the latter document evokes the themes of adaptation and unity in diversity, whereas *Ecclesia Dei* speaks of symphony, referring precisely to the preservation of ancient customs (No. 5a).

It will be easier for me to describe here the monastic consecrations of altars in the recent past. They have multiplied somewhat, as a sign of the rich vitality of the catacombs: in contrast to the Church in the open, there is indeed the contemplative life, cloistered and hidden; it must be, in the words of Saint Teresa, the love at the heart of the Church⁴¹. We are far here from the disastrous reports on the lack of vitality in the Church that are loudly proclaimed to the general public in order to make them despair. But from another point of view, care must be taken to ensure that these liturgical successes, which make public what should remain mystically hidden, do not turn against monastic souls, who are so vulnerable as soon as they leave the precise framework of their sanctification.

I will therefore tell you about the liturgical functions that I have heard most about or witnessed myself. First, in 1912, Quarr Abbey, which was Solesmes in exile after the expulsions at the beginning of the century, saw its church consecrated with all its altars. The high altar and an altar in the transept were consecrated on the day of the church's dedication; the eleven altars in the crypt had been consecrated a fortnight earlier by the local bishop and Dom Delatte in a single service; Finally, four days after the dedication, the last three altars in the nave were in turn consecrated by a bishop who was a friend of the Solesmes family, Dom Delatte and Dom Cabrol. Consequently, these consecrations were spread over three ceremonies lasting less than a month⁴². When I entered Fontgombault, our dean, who had entered Quarr in 1911, felt that he would never see such liturgical splendour again. He remembered the perfect harmony between these complex rites and the simplicity of the pink brick church.

Fontgombault underwent a new dedication after the restoration of the Romanesque church in the last century. This took place in 1954. The high altar and nine side altars were consecrated. I knew many of those who witnessed this event first-hand. *The Ordo* in force, as at Quarr Abbey, was still that of 1595, before the simplifications of 1961. At Fontgombault, the service therefore began with the three exterior sprinklings, followed by the solemn entrance and the three interior sprinklings, after which the liturgical acts took place in a manner very similar to the current rite. Various prelates consecrated the nine secondary altars simultaneously with the Archbishop of Bourges, who officiated at the high altar. Each of these prelates was surrounded by two assistant priests, a master of ceremonies, a thurifer and two acolytes acting as a reduced chapel. The sound system allowed the rites to be synchronised with those taking place at the high altar. The Archbishop of Bourges was, of course, surrounded by all the necessary ministers. If you count carefully, there were sixty-three people in the ceremony, just for the nine secondary altars!

The service began at 8 a.m. and ended around 1:30 p.m. After a half-hour break, Mass was sung at the high altar, ending at 3:15 p.m.; the first Masses at the side altars were not celebrated until the following day. At the end of the evening, at 7 p.m., the office resumed with the small hours not yet sung and vespers. From the lighting of the altar, the thurifer priest of each of the altars swung his censer until the end of the service. The current abbot of Fontgombault, Dom Forgeot,

⁴¹ SAINT THÉRÈSE OF THE CHILD JESUS: *Story of a Soul*, Autobiographical Manuscripts, Ms B. 3 v°.

⁴² Dom SAVATON: *Life of Dom Delatte, Abbot of Solesmes*, Solesmes: Édition de Solesmes, 1975, pp. 262-264.

then a young postulant, was the cross-bearer at Vespers, which closed the festivities in the evening; he remembers that, when greeting the community at the end of the service, he could not see the monks' stalls from the altar, even though they were only fifteen metres away. It was a service that would remain etched in the memory forever, a service that one was proud to have had the honour of taking part in once in a lifetime. Nevertheless, it is understandable that it is rare to find both the opportunity and the circumstances that allow for such a display.

Some of you may have witnessed the dedication of the church and altars in Jouques in 1984, Randol in 1985, Le Barroux in 1989, or Triors just one year ago. Le Barroux used the 1961 ritual, adapting it slightly to the circumstances; the ceremony lasted five hours, including Mass; each prelate consecrating an altar was surrounded by two assistants, and they did not celebrate immediately on the altar they had consecrated, in order to maintain the primacy of the main altar consecrated by Cardinal Gagnon. At Triors last year, as at Randol, we used the 1977 ritual, with the addition of several elements from the 1961 ritual, according to the latitude I mentioned above. The ceremony was a little shorter than at Le Barroux. At Triors, the prelates consecrating the secondary altars had only one acolyte and one thurifer to assist them in their duties; moreover, these prelates concelebrated around the local bishop who consecrated the high altar, so that the consecration and the first Mass were also separated with regard to these secondary altars.

The diocese of Valence had generously provided the relics for all our altars, including that of the high altar, taken from the cathedral treasury: the head of Saint Rufus, founder of the Church of Avignon, who is believed to be the son of Simon of Cyrene from the Gospel. In the aftermath of the war, the Bishop of Valence had prepared a large number of small sepulchres for the reconstruction of churches, and the surplus was given to us for the altars in the crypt. I confess that I found this gesture to be more in keeping with healthy, traditional piety than the response of the Vatican official who, when asked, referred me to recent documents stating that it was better to do without relics than to introduce fragments considered insignificant.

5. Conclusion

The history and unfolding of such diverse and evocative rites invite Christians to better consider the nobility of their own baptism. *Christian, recognise your dignity*, recommends Saint Leo⁴³, and this recommendation is timeless, in keeping with the words of the Lord: "If salt loses its flavour, with what shall it be seasoned?"⁴⁴. "Our souls are dear to God because of their dedication," wrote Madame Cécile Bruyère, founder of the nuns of Solesmes; "we must show how highly we value our consecration by confirming it more and more"⁴⁵. The dignity of the Christian, the leaven of human dignity for all, is rooted in his humility, which opens him to the magnificence of divine graces. Humility and moral beauty go hand in hand; humility opens us to liturgical beauty, the sacrament of divine Beauty. When Saint Pius X asked his people to pray on Beauty, he saw, I believe, these

⁴³ *Serm.* 21.

⁴⁴ Mt 5:13.

⁴⁵ *In Spiritu et Veritate*, Solesmes: Édition de Solesmes, 1966, p. 88.

immense perspectives that seem so thwarted today. Yet our present difficulties are those of our lack of faith: let us be certain that this good of the Church belongs to us insofar as it is in the hands of the Holy Spirit and the humility of the Christian people, pastors and faithful alike.

The consecration of altars since the peace of the Church can be reduced, as we have seen, to two types of rites: the procession of relics and their burial in the altar on the one hand, and the purification and anointing with fire, illumination and vesting of the altar on the other, in parallel with the rites of Christian initiation. The complexity of the rites, both in their formation and in their liturgical performance, even with the new ritual, forces us to see in the rite of consecration of an altar an expansion of the liturgy throughout social life, the influence of the Church on the entire city, and beyond that on the whole of creation.

Yes, the liturgy of the consecration of an altar and a church seems very complicated to us Christians who are in such a hurry. Nevertheless, this subject deserves our attention; examining our conscience from this angle should bear fruit. The altar, on which so many meticulous and complex rites converge, is the heir to the ancient *Domus Ecclesiae*. The altar is mystery as it stands on the street. The beauty that the Church possesses, the beauty itself upon which she prays, deserves to be celebrated. Can one even exaggerate in such a domain? One does not take possession of the altar in just any way: we know too well how banality expels respect for mystery, and conversely how hieraticism goes hand in hand with humility before the thrice-holy God.

The Christian temple effectively inherited the ancient *Domus Ecclesiae*, which was not only a church, of course, but also the bishop's palace, a refectory with its food reserves, a dispensary and a hospice. We have a precise inventory of the church in Circa in North Africa, due to the persecution it suffered in 303⁴⁶; no detail is spared us, from the wheat supplies to the number of pairs of shoes in reserve for the poor. All these practical details suggest a social life revolving around the mysteries and radiating them in and through charity. The *Domus Ecclesiae* radiates from this altar, which stands in the middle of the main hall of the ancient dwelling. Even before the peace of the Church, the altar was already enriching humanity with its shadows and lights. There was no opposition between the sacred and the profane, between the liturgical and the charitable, but the latter seemed to enter spontaneously into the orbit of worship and the altar. The deacon is the link between these two planes, of which he is the minister. This is important to understand in our time, which seeks to restore lustre to this ministry: we must not distort it or amputate it from either of its functions.

You will not mind me saying so, but the *Domus Ecclesiae* also reminds me of Saint Benedict. He was undoubtedly the heir to this ancient spirit when, in his Rule, he provided for an oratory where nothing inappropriate should be allowed to remain, but at the same time, around the altar and

⁴⁶ cf *Gesta apud Zenophilum*; P.L. VIII, col. 731. The residence has two courtyards with porticoes separating it from the public thoroughfare; it also comprises a whole complex of dwellings around the large enclosed hall, a reception room with high windows obviously reserved for worship and flanked by adjoining rooms in the side aisles; these contain all the service accommodation: living quarters, but also bathrooms, cellars and storerooms. Catechumens, the faithful and penitents had their place there; the clergy was responsible for the administration of the premises: there was an archive, a library, sacristies, but also stores of clothing, bedding, and supplies to provide for the poor and the needy of all kinds.

the worship, to which nothing should be preferred⁴⁷, the monastery must include everything necessary for daily life, in order to form a small self-sufficient city, with its mill, its bakery, and its gatehouse, which is often a chapel to meet the needs of the poor⁴⁸. Similarly, the Basiliade is a kind of city of the poor, surrounding the city monastery designed by Saint Basil of Caesarea⁴⁹. Without noticing it sufficiently, our century has experienced the same phenomenon: the Polish churches of Nowa Huta, won after a hard struggle against an atheist power, were also designed as a symbol and an area of freedom in the face of totalitarian power. In turn, they gave a good idea of this small city of God in the radiance of the Lord's altar; the practical side, far from being hindered, was stimulated, with catechism rooms, a kitchen, and a dormitory. *Solidarnosc* was born in these areas of freedom and cultural beauty⁵⁰.

Let us return to antiquity. Because of the altar, the place reserved for worship was, of course, sacred, set apart, privileged; it was called the *Dominicum*, whose Greek name *kuriakon* is found in the Germanic name *Kirche* and the Anglo-Saxon *Church*. As for the name *Domus Ecclesiae*, it was carried over from Greek into the Latin languages, *Ekklesia-Ecclesia*, Church. The Lord and the Church, the Bridegroom, *Kuriov*, and the Bride, *Ekklesia*, both left their names on the altar, the place of mystery that opens us to the fruits of the redemptive Incarnation!⁵¹

⁴⁷ cf. *Regula*, c. 43, 5.

⁴⁸ cf. *Regula*, c. 52, 1 s and 66, 11-18.

⁴⁹ PAUL ALLARD, *Saint Basile*, Paris: Librairie Lecoffre, 1899, pp. 109-111.

⁵⁰ See PATRICE DE PLUNKETT, *Interview with Lech Walesa*, in *Figaro-Magazine*, 3 September 1988, p. 101 ff.

⁵¹ See JOSEPH RATZINGER: *Das neue Volk Gottes*, Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1969, chap. 1. French translation: *Le nouveau peuple de Dieu*, Aubier Montaigne, 1971, p. 17.