

The Altar, Our Primary Focus When We Worship.

Our altars will vary in size, style, and material. Some are square, some rectangular. The four sides represent the four ends of the earth. The preferred material is stone, most common stone is marble. A stone altar brings to mind that Christ is the stone rejected by the builders. In the dioceses of the United States, altars may be made with wood - representing the wood of the cross. Some altars are small to accommodate a single presider while some are large for multiple concelebrants.

Wood or stone, large or small, our altars are well constructed and often appointed with symbols of Christ: the lamb, the *Chi-Rio*, the Greek letters alpha and omega, the elements of Eucharist grapes and wheat, or even with an image of the Last Supper. Some altars are further highlighted by placing an umbrella type structure over it called a *baldachin* - one is over the altar in our Cathedral.

No matter how they are constructed they symbolize both the table of the Last Supper and the sacrifice of Jesus' passion and death. It is a central image of Christ our head and the focus of the entire community - Christ's body. It is the privileged place for *The Book of the Gospels* when Mass begins.

Other than placing *The Book of the Gospels* on it, the altar is reserved for the celebration of the Eucharist and it is never used to place items other than those used in the celebration of the Eucharist. It is covered with a white altar cloth and on top of the altar cloth is placed a white corporal for the chalice and paten. The size of the corporal can vary depending on the number of chalices (communion cups) and patens (communion plates) that will be needed for the community's celebration. Candles are placed along side the altar and are lit either from the beginning of Mass or at least during the preparation of the gifts. The prayers for the presider, the *Sacramentary*, is also be placed on the altar.

The altar is not the place for the opening or closing prayers nor the reading of scripture. It is the primary symbol of Christ in our worship space. We treat it with the greatest of reverence. When we enter or leave the sanctuary we make a deep bow of reverence to the altar. The presider, concelebrants and the deacon all venerate the altar with a kiss both before and after celebrating Mass. As Mass begins on Holy Days, Feast, and Solemnity, the altar may be incensed in preparation of our celebration. With the exception of the season of Lent, we also adorn the altar with flowers and green plants, but never so many that the altar is hidden from the view of the assembly. The Altar is truly the primary image of Christ, the central focus of our celebration of the Eucharist.