

What's in a Catholic church building?

A. The Structure of a Church

Catholic churches vary tremendously in shape and size, especially today. However, there are essential features that are recognisable in every church. Most obviously, whether the church is long and thin (basilica-shaped), cruciform (in the shape of a cross, with two transepts jutting out from the sides of the nave - as in most of the great medieval cathedrals of this country) or in the round (the modern preference, similar to the great theatres constructed by ancient Greeks and Romans), you will notice that there is a part of the church designed for the people and a part for the celebration of the Mass. This division of church into nave and sanctuary is not just for convenience sake, separating the altar from the people so that people are not crowding round, blocking off the sight of what is going on from the rest of the people. After all, before the Second Vatican Council, the priest said Mass facing towards God, with his back to the people - so they wouldn't have been able to see what he was doing even if the altar was a great deal closer to them. The nave/sanctuary division is very ancient and hugely symbolic - especially for anyone soaked in the Old Testament and the worship of the people of Israel. Basically, the plan of a Catholic church is modelled on that of the Temple in Jerusalem which itself was designed to reproduce Moses' Tent of Meeting (where God met and spoke with Moses in the desert) which was, in its turn, a representation of how God arranged things when he appeared to Moses on Mt. Sinai to give him the tablets of the Law. In effect, the appearance of God to Moses on Sinai becomes the norm for worship in Israel - as it happened then, so it continued to be done throughout Israel's history, and so the apostles and the early Church maintained it from the earliest days.

1. Moses worships God at Mt. Sinai

At Sinai, we find God at the top of the mountain, wreathed in smoke, summoning Moses to the heights to be the mediator - what God tells him, he is to relay to the people, assembled at the foot of the mountain in continuous prayer. Moses is to intercede with God on behalf of the people, asking for the forgiveness of their sins, and then he is to return to the foot of the mountain, proclaim God's words to the people and represent God to them. See *Ex. 19:16-25*.

2. Moses worships God in the desert: the Tent of Meeting

When God instructs Moses to build the Tent of Meeting as the place where God would continue to speak to the people through Moses, in effect, he is re-creating the same circumstances. The Tent of Meeting becomes a form of portable Sinai - to be dismantled and carried with them wherever they go, so that there is no need to go all

the way back to Sinai to hear God speak. Thus, the situation of Sinai is re-created: the base of the mountain is represented by a fence - the people gather around the fence as they did at the base of the mountain. Inside the fence is an open area, immediately in front of the Tent of Meeting. This open space represents the mountain itself. Here, the priests of the Tribe of Levi are permitted to enter and to offer sacrifices and incense on behalf of the people (just as God permitted the leaders of Israel to accompany Moses on one occasion, to eat with him on Mt. Sinai - *Ex. 24:9-11*). Here was placed the famous Minora (the seven-branched candlestick representing the holiness of God), the altar of incense (to represent the smoke of Sinai as well as the prayers of the people) and the altar of 'showbread', twelve loaves, to represent the twelve tribes, eaten by the priests in a communion meal symbolising the communion between God and Israel through the Covenant. This they called the "Holy Place" - it was sacred to the priests, and only Levitical priests were permitted to enter it. From this court, the priests would proclaim to the people, gathered outside the precinct the sacred words of the Law - God's teaching. The Tent itself was where God descended to speak to Moses, and later to Aaron. It was called the "Holy of Holies" and inside it was placed the Ark of the Covenant - the box in which was kept the two stone tablets of the Law, as well as a jar of manna and the staff of Aaron that budded. This place was the most sacred place on earth: it was forbidden for anyone to enter here except the High Priest, and then, only on Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), when the High Priest went before God to offer the blood of a sacrificed bull and to plead for forgiveness of the sins of the people. Entry was forbidden because it was the very resting-place of God - present through the tablets of the Law, which his finger had written on Mt. Sinai. The whole area inside the fence (the open space and the Tent of Meeting) was called the "Tabernacle." All these arrangements were carried out by Moses under instruction from God - you can read them in *Ex. 25 - 27*.

3. *Worship in the Kingdom of Israel: the Temple in Jerusalem*

When King David brought the Ark to Jerusalem, and his son, Solomon, built the first Temple in the Holy City, he simply built in wood and stone a permanent version of the Tent and fence, which the people had used in the desert. SO - we find a wide-open court in front of the Temple for the people to gather at the time of sacrifice. Then, there is a solid wall (to replace the fence), marking out the boundary of the Tabernacle - it is up several steps, to symbolise the mountain. Within the wall is the open court, where the altar of sacrifice was positioned. Beside the altar was the bronze basin for the rites of liturgical purification (where the priests would wash themselves clean of ritual sin before sacrificing). Here also, the sacred texts of God's words were read to the people, reminding them of the conditions of the Covenant. Behind this was the opening to the Holy Place - now not a tent but a solid structure of stone and wood inside which was placed the altar of incense, the altar of showbread and the Minora. At the back of the Holy Place was a thick curtain, separating it from the Holy of Holies, in which was placed the Ark. Solomon had built in stone and wood what Moses had built in canvas in the desert, in accordance with God's detailed instructions: this was to be the style and structure of the place where he would speak to Israel. When Solomon's Temple was destroyed and then re-built (after the Exile in Babylon), its structure was the same as Solomon's. When Herod the Great (who slaughtered the innocents in an attempt to kill Christ as an infant) tore down the Temple to build a new, greater one, he kept the structure the same, only many times

larger, more gold, elaborate decorations, a bigger altar, ornamental turrets on the wall enclosing the "Holy Place" etc.

4. Worship in the New Israel: the Catholic Church

This was the structure of the meeting place between God and man - so when the early Christians began to build their churches, they rapidly adopted the same pattern. The only difference is that the Holy Place which was reserved to Levitical priests alone, is now the place where the priestly people gather to meet. They were unworthy, in Moses' time of setting foot in the Holy Place because of their sin - but now, since the coming of Christ, they approach God with a new dignity. The nave of our churches is the new Holy Place - here incense is burned (recalling the smoke of Sinai and the ancient association with the prayers of the people) and the Law of God is proclaimed to the people (as it was in the Temple and as Moses did from within the Holy Place in the desert). We have retained a concept, however, of the Holy of Holies - the sanctuary. As in the Temple, there are usually several steps leading up to this place (a reminder of Sinai) and here, God is present in a visible, tangible way that is reminiscent of the Ark (although in a way far greater than the Ark) - this is the Blessed Sacrament. Like the tablets of the Ten Commandments, the Blessed Sacrament is housed in a box. Access to the box is restricted (it is locked) - and in days gone by, it was only a priest who would approach or open it (as with the Holy of Holies). We have also retained use of the word "Tabernacle" - now it applies to the sacred box in which the Blessed Sacrament is kept. In front of the Holy of Holies (which is the tabernacle containing the Blessed Sacrament) we find the altar of sacrifice, exactly where it was placed from the meal of Moses and Aaron on Mt. Sinai (*Ex. 24:9-11*). Beside or near the altar, we usually find the font - not for purification from ritual uncleanness but for spiritual purification from moral uncleanness (the font of baptism, containing the waters that forgive sins and prepare us to offer the perfect and acceptable sacrifice, the Mass). This arrangement is no accident: it is a deliberate and conscious attempt by the Church to model her worship on the instructions given to Moses. Taking the appearance of God to Moses on Sinai as the way God wanted to encounter his people, both ancient Israel and the New Israel have built their places of worship as architectural expressions of how things were arranged by God on Mt. Sinai. When we go to Mass, we are (symbolically) ascending Sinai: we are liturgically fulfilling what Moses was unable to complete - we celebrate the culmination of all that Sinai meant for where Moses received the Commandments, the Word of God, carved in stone, we receive the Word of God as he truly is (Jesus Christ, the Word from the beginning), not carved in stone but received into our bodies and souls, to infuse us with divine grace, to give us new hearts (hearts of flesh in place of our hearts of stone - *Ezekiel 36:26*).

We should look on the Tent of Meeting, the Jerusalem Temple and the rites and objects we find there as pointing forward to their completion and fulfilment in the New Israel, the final Temple, the Body of Christ, the Church. All the rites and all the sacred objects we use today were prefigured in the rites and sacred objects of the Old Testament. Only in the light of Christ and the worship of the New Covenant, centred on the sacrifice of Christ, do we see the fuller and deeper meaning of all that Moses was preparing the people of Israel for. St. Thomas Aquinas observed that the sacraments or rites of the Old Testament were *many, complex, and symbolic* while the sacraments and rites of the New Testament are, by comparison, *few, simple and*

effective. This is primarily true because all the rites and liturgies of the Old Testament point towards a greater fulfilment than they are capable of – they are not effective of themselves and never achieve inner righteousness for the people and so indicate the need for a greater institution in which all that they are prefiguring will be achieved. This is done in Christ and perpetuated in the Church, his Body.

B. The Lay-out of a Church - the Nave

This is the "Holy Place" of the New Israel. This was closed to all but the Levitical priests in the order of the Old Testament. In the New Covenant Church, Christ has made us a "kingdom of priests" by sharing with us his own Royal Priesthood. Ancient Israel was not worthy to enter the Holy Place because she was still solidly wedded to her sin. The priests who entered the Holy Place did so rarely, and only to offer incense - they were frightened that entering God's house might mean encountering God - and since they were in a state of sin, this would mean death (see Zechariah's fear when he sees the angel standing beside the altar if incense in the Holy Place - *Lk. 1:8-12*). We approach the Holy Place with a confidence they could never have because we do so in a state of holiness (because of Baptism - if we have sinned since Baptism, we need the sacrament of Reconciliation so that we truly do come before God in a state of holiness: this is why the Church has from the very beginning stressed the need for sacramental absolution before receiving Holy Communion if we are in a state of grave sin). However, we also come before God in great reverence. He is our God, the Almighty, as well as our Father. His holiness demands our humility and respect - not in a cringing, servile way as slaves are fearful of their master, but the respect which a proud son feels in the presence of the father he loves and honours. Showing deference towards him is one of the ways he shows his father the respect and love he has for him: no less and a great deal more is asked of us in the Holy Place of the New Israel.

Holy Water

At the door of every Catholic church you will find a holy water stoop. Holy water is not magical: it doesn't work like a talisman, or a spell, ensuring good luck or protection from illness. Primarily, it is a reminder of Baptism. For this reason, because it points to a sacrament, it is called a sacramental. This means that it is not a sacrament ordained by God, but a derivative from one - it points to and reminds us of one of the sacraments (in this case, Baptism). In other words, it does not impart sacramental grace, the life of God himself, BUT is a holy action, which should lead us to a proper disposition (repentance for sin, consciousness of the grace we have received, resolution to live the commands of the New Covenant, deeper devotion towards God and service of neighbour etc.). In so far as we use holy water for this purpose, not in a purely mechanical or mindlessly habitual way, we are co-operating with grace by allowing the Holy Spirit to configure our lives to Christ in love of him and of the Father.

Usually we bless ourselves with holy water when entering and leaving the church. On entering the church, the blessing has a twofold purpose and significance:

1. ***A Sign of Purification in Baptism:*** reminiscent of the rites of ritual washing by which the Levitical priests prepared to offer sacrifice, we remind ourselves of the washing and forgiveness of Baptism as a preparation to offer the Mass. The blessing with holy water does not forgive us our sins - but it renews in us our consciousness of having been forgiven all our sins in Baptism, the call that Baptism gives us to avoid sin against the New Covenant and the need for absolution if we have fallen into serious sin. In effect, it helps us to recollect our thoughts and examine our consciences before we begin the worship of God, so that it is truly a sacrifice in spirit and in truth, offered with a contrite and humbled heart.

2. ***Self-Consecration:*** blessing ourselves is an act of self-consecration before we offer the sacrifice of the Mass. It sets apart what we are to do as an act of worship, dedicated to God in praise of his name. It also sets us apart at this time for a sacred purpose. We prepare to act as God's adopted children, doing what he commanded us to do at the Last Supper, the action that most fully defines us as the Body of Christ. It is the fulfilling of all that Baptism has begun in us: at that time we became God's children, incorporated into Christ as God's son in the eternal Son - now we are to offer the Son to the Father and therefore ourselves too, since we are incorporated into him in Baptism.

When leaving the Church, it has become customary to bless ourselves with holy water again. This is for one main reason:

1. ***Consecration to the Apostolate of the Baptised:*** as we began our prayers by consecrating ourselves to this sacred work, so we go out into the world doing the same. Baptism is the commission received from Christ himself to go out, preach in his name, teach all he had taught and bring all nations to baptism and faith (Mt. 28:18-20). Strengthened by the very presence of Christ through Holy Communion, we are prepared to go back into the world to preach the Gospel. Just before doing so, we renew our consecration to evangelise by recalling that this is a commission we received in Baptism. It means consecrating the world and making sacred the places we live and work in, introducing the values of the Gospel wherever we go - home, marketplace, work, holiday, street, rearing the children etc. Baptism has called us to imitate Christ and to live as Christ in the world.

We bless ourselves in the sign of the cross, from forehead to waist, then from left shoulder to right, dedicating ourselves and our work to the glory of God, "*in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.*" This is not a magical incantation or spell - it does not bring us luck or instant success if we try it just before betting on the Derby. It is an act of faith - we are stating not just in words but also in bodily actions that our whole faith and hope is placed in the Divine Trinity through the redemptive work of Christ on the cross. The earliest martyrs would dedicate themselves to God by signing themselves and each other with the sign of the cross just before going out to face the lions in the Circus Maximus. For many of the martyrs, the cross was the form of their own martyrdom: St. Andrew the Apostle was crucified in the form of an X, hence the design of the cross of St. Andrew which you see on the flag of Scotland, and St. Peter actually requested to be martyred by crucifixion since it was the means by which Christ saved the world, only requesting that he be martyred upside down because he was not worthy to be martyred in exactly the same way that the Son of God was.

Again, this expresses their unshakeable conviction that Christ's death on the cross would transform their agonising death into the means of their sharing his eternal life. To mark ourselves with the sign of the cross is to make our bodies the billboards on which we profess the core of our faith: Christ died for us that we would never die the eternal death but be raised with him to everlasting life. Given all this reasoning and thinking behind making the sign of the cross, it is stunning to note that making the sign of the cross has been rejected by every Christian body in the West other than the Catholic Church since the Reformation. In the sixteenth century, making the sign of the cross was sufficient to have a man arrested as a Catholic and therefore a traitor to the crown - Catholics were martyred for making the sign of the cross.

It is important to remember that we use holy water for what it represents to us: Baptism is the key and the centre of the Christian life. From it flows the whole life of grace, which brings us to heaven. Our salvation depends on living out the meaning of Baptism - divine sonship planted in us by the Holy Spirit. Given the importance of Baptism, it is no wonder that the Church has always sought ways to remind her members of the implications of what Christ has and is achieving for us through the grace of his abiding presence, given in Baptism.

The Stations of the Cross

The Stations of the Cross are the series of images, on the walls of the church each with a number, running from 1 to 14, depicting scenes from the Passion of Our Lord. Praying, or walking the Stations is a devotional practice which began in the early fourth century as soon as Christianity was legalised in the Roman Empire and people could make devotions of faith in public without fear of persecution and execution (this happened in about 313 A.D.). Within fifty years, Christians were flocking from all over Europe to the Holy Land on pilgrimage.

The festival which most pilgrims wanted to take part in was naturally the celebration of the last week of Our Lord's life: the Last Supper (for which they went to the Cenacle (the room where he was supposed to have celebrated the Last Supper), his betrayal (they would gather in the garden of Gethsemane), the Trial before Pontius Pilate (for which they went to the ruins of the Antonia fortress), the Via Crucis or Via Dolorosa (the route through and out of Jerusalem along which Christ carried the cross from the Antonia to Calvary), the place of his death (Golgotha) burial and resurrection. Thousands of the people of Jerusalem would walk this journey on Good Friday, offering prayers and devotions to the crucified Lord at 14 stops along the way where various things had happened to Christ. Practically all of these stops and events are recorded in the Scriptures. Along the way they would read the relevant passages of the Gospels together with devotional meditations and prayers to help them focus on the reality of the Lord's Passion and explain the inner and profound significance of what he was accomplishing. We can be certain that this was already a well-established custom by 381 because of the lengthy account of a Spanish nun, Egeria, who visited the Holy Places that year on pilgrimage and who recorded all that she saw and did in extraordinary detail for the other nuns in Spain to read when she returned home. Her account has survived and makes fascinating reading.

Very quickly, the practice of using these 14 stops or "stations" to meditate on the Passion spread throughout the Church. Because the cost of making the actual pilgrimage to Palestine was so high, there were few who could afford to go in person: so in many places, pictures depicting the event which was being recalled were made and hung in churches all over Europe. This enabled the pious and devout who were poor to walk in the steps of Christ and to benefit from this extremely popular and effective devotion.

The Stations of the Cross occupy an important place in the devotional life of the Church. They speak to us very powerfully of the sacrifice Christ gave of his life for us – and the stations ground us in reality, forcing us to try to come to terms with the physical and actual reality of the crucifixion. It is too easy to sanitise the cross, to leave out the detail of what Christ went through, and to allow ourselves to become blasé about his death. We need to be reminded of his sufferings NOT to feed our sense of guilt or to punish ourselves for sin but so as to come to a deeper appreciation of his love for us. When we start to forget how much he suffered, then we start to forget how much he thought we were worth and the willingness with which he paid the price.

In addition to this, the Stations of the Cross have important lessons for us in the realm of coping with personal suffering. By this I am not referring to the ‘stiff-upper-lip’ school of spirituality – the approach that would advise us “*stop complaining; look what the Good Lord had to suffer. If he can do it then so can we.*” That is DIY spirituality, which helps little. The true benefit in the Stations is in considering suffering itself. Christ’s suffering is *HOW* he redeemed the world, not an unfortunate chapter of his life that he needed to overcome in order to save us. Contrast what we are saying with any action-blockbuster at the cinema: the hero who is trying to rescue the hostages (or whatever) will usually achieve considerable success until, at some stage he is captured, or severely injured or in some way compromised so that we all think ‘*how will he ever be able to rescue them NOW?*’ Then, through quick thinking or sleight of hand or brute determination, the hero overcomes his enemies in spite of the severe setback and the film ends in triumph. In that scenario, the suffering he undergoes is not usually the means of securing the release of the hostages: he saves them *in spite* of all the pain and suffering he has to endure. In the Stations, we proclaim that we have a completely different attitude to suffering: we don’t endure it as an obstacle in the way of our progress to Christ – like the Way of the Cross, it ***IS THE PATH TO CHRIST***. In our willingness to suffer, to live through the difficulties and anxieties of this life, we are the conquerors. Christ’s death was not a setback he was forced to endure before he could get back to saving us (as the setbacks are for our notional hero in the film!); Christ’s death was precisely the means he chose to use to redeem us from death. The consequences this has for suffering are shattering: suffering is no longer arbitrary or meaningless: God even uses suffering, when it comes our way, in order to hasten our redemption. Nothing in our experience is so destructive and evil that God can not in some mysterious way use it to bring off a greater good than would have been possible without it.

The Stations of the Cross are widely celebrated in the season of Lent (the 40 days before Easter), when we prepare ourselves to celebrate the mysteries of Christ’s Passion and Resurrection by inner repentance, renewed prayer, acts of penance such as fasting and acts of charity such as almsgiving). Beyond this, some parishioners like to pray the Stations each Friday in order to remember the Passion, to renew their

repentance from sin and deepen their love of God in response to dwelling on the sacrifice he offered of his life on the cross.

The 14 stations are traditionally celebrated as follows:

1) Christ is condemned to death by Pontius Pilate	<i>Like a lamb before its shearers, Christ accepts the unjust sentence knowing that his death will redeem the world.</i>
2) Christ is given the cross to carry	<i>Christ accepts the physical consequences of his condemnation –physical suffering.</i>
3) Christ falls for the first time	<i>Christ's physical frailty is exposed, his weakness following his trial, scourging and humiliation at the hands of the Roman soldiers.</i>
4) Christ meets his Blessed Mother, Mary	<i>The poignancy of this scene is heartbreaking: the disciple who loved him most selflessly is unable to help or to abandon him</i>
5) Christ's cross is laid on Simon of Cyrene	<i>To ensure Christ would not die on the way, Simon carries the cross of redemption: this was done to ensure that Christ would not expire before he was crucified.</i>
6) Christ's face is wiped by Veronica: he imprints the cloth with his image	<i>Even in this very real suffering, Christ consoles those who assist him – the cloth that received his image was widely venerated throughout the Middle Ages.</i>
7) Christ falls for the second time	<i>Christ's weakness and first fall was no stage-managed demonstration of frailty: his successive falls show us the reality of his extensive suffering.</i>
8) Christ meets the women of Jerusalem who mourn for him	<i>While the women of Jerusalem mourn his death, Christ's concern is for their safety: he warns them of the destruction of Jerusalem (which took place in 70 AD.)</i>
9) Christ falls for the third time	<i>Mentally and physically Christ is exhausted: his weakened condition explains, medically, the reason for his rapid death on the cross in only 3 hours rather than the usual couple of days.</i>
10) Christ is stripped of his garments	<i>Every last shred of dignity is torn from Christ in the very act of mercifully saving us from our sins.</i>
11) Christ is nailed to the cross	<i>Devotion to the wounds of the crucifixion have played a major part in our faith: the five wounds, esp., of hands, feet and side, became symbols of Christ's death, acceptance of suffering, unity with us in our pain, self-sacrificing love etc.</i>
12) Christ dies on the cross	<i>The greatest disaster for mankind (the sin of Adam and Eve) and his greatest moment (the crucifixion) have a common element – the tree: where man was tempted to eat (and brought death to all) now the new Adam eats the bitter fruit of the cross and dies (bringing life to all).</i>
13) Christ's body is taken down from the cross by Joseph of Arimathea and laid in the arms of his mother	<i>Like the fourth station, the poignancy of this scene is overwhelming: mother cradles son in her arms. She was told by Simeon that a sword would pierce her heart (Lk. 2:35) but nothing could wound Our Lady as grievously as the humiliation and death of her precious child.</i>
14) Christ is buried in the	<i>The honour with which his body is buried reflects the</i>

tomb	<i>honour that was his in life – reverent burial of the dead is an act of love (for the departed), of faith (the body was the Spirit's temple and thus a sacred place) and of hope (in the resurrection).</i>
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Many writers through the centuries have written prayers and meditations to go with the Stations of the Cross. Some like to add a fifteenth station - the Resurrection of Our Lord - although this was not a part of the original devotion because it began as a Good Friday devotion (so it would be incongruous to include the resurrection two days before actually celebrating it!)

The Confessional

This is the small room, divided in half by a screen or partition where the sacrament of Reconciliation is celebrated. The purpose of the screen is not (as is popularly believed) to hide the identity of the penitent from the priest. If you think about it, this is most unrealistic since most of us can recognise each other from accent and tone of voice! Its purpose was something quite different (it just also happens to give the penitent a comforting sense of anonymity as well!) – this was the protection of both penitent and priest. Being alone with one other person has been regarded by outsiders as a very suspicious notion for centuries. Anti Catholics have sniggered at what really happens in the confessional since the confession of sins stopped being public and in front of the whole community and became instead a private and individual thing. Books written for the training of priests in the 700s and 800s warn the priests that they will have to counter the innuendo of anti Catholics who hint and sneer at impropriety in the secret of the confessional. They are warned to take every precaution not only that they never do anything which gives rise to scandal but also that they take every precaution to ensure that these stories and rumours could never be believed. Nor were these stories just a relic of the Middle Ages: when the Catholic Church was officially restored to this country in 1850 there was a series of anti-Catholic articles, leaders, letters and cartoons in all the major newspapers: favourite among the arguments aired for never allowing Catholics toleration in this country was the repeated refrain: Catholic priests will seduce your daughters in the dark of the confessional - they are forbidden from revealing what happens in there, so you will never know what terrible abuses are going on, what lies he is filling your daughter's head with, what perversions he practices in there on young impressionable and vulnerable minds. Is it any wonder that in the course of the ages, Catholic priests have insisted that there be a solid barrier between them and the penitent so that these rumours could be shown to be no more than bigotry and prejudice?

For this reason, the habit grew up of erecting a solid wall between priest and penitent with only a grill to allow sound to pass from one side to the other and with separate entrances to each side of the box, so that the priest could not get through to the other side, or the penitent get through to the priest without going out of the box and in another door - which would be noticed by anyone else in the church at the time. Even missionaries were obliged to use whatever they could to separate themselves from the penitent, even the wheels of the bicycles they would take with them around the mission stations. The confessional is designed to guarantee safety for the penitent and also the confidence that whatever they say and confess cannot be overheard by anyone else (something which is a great deal harder to establish in an open, face-to-

face confession). It is also designed to protect the priest from the accusation of abuse - if there is a solid wall separating him from the penitent, no accusation of abuse or attack could possibly be believed.

The existence of a confessional in every church is a reminder to us all that at the heart of the faith is the truth that God is forgiving love - the door to receive God's mercy is always open, as indeed God is always ready to impart his absolution. BUT he does ask of us that we truly seek and desire forgiveness: this takes a movement of the soul away from the sin committed and a resolution to avoid sin in the future. SO, God's forgiveness is given when we truly desire and seek it: when we come forward for absolution in the sacrament of Reconciliation.

The Lady Chapel

As every family will have in some prominent and honoured place a photograph of the mother who bore their child or children, so in every Catholic church you will find a Lady Chapel, dedicated to the Mother whom Christ gave to the Church through St. John while he was dying on the cross. In some churches it is not a chapel but a statue placed in a spot of its own.

It is critical to remember that Catholics are NOT worshipping Mary when they pray to her. Catholics venerate Mary as we do the saints, but worship is given to God, and to him alone. The confusion is easy to understand. Catholics offer to the saints their prayers, and to God they offer their prayers AND worship (the sacrifice of the Mass). Only God receives sacrifice. But both God and the saints receive prayers and intercessions - pleas for help. (Just as we ask each other to pray for us, so we ask our older brothers and sisters, the saints, to pray for us). BUT, at the Reformation, the protestant denominations rejected the idea of sacrifice - Christ has offered it once and for all, so no sacrifice could be given after Calvary. This left them with prayers alone, which they then gave to God. Now they see Catholics giving to Mary and the saints what they will only give to God. This is the root of their thinking that we worship Mary as a parallel to Christ or the Father. WE DO NOT. When we pray in the Lady Chapel, we are NOT worshipping her or offering the sacrifice of the Church to her. We are doing to our Mother what we do to each other – asking the family to pray to God for me. We need to remember this when we do go to the Lady Chapel and offer our prayers: we are venerating her as the greatest of all the saints, and the masterpiece of God's power, but we are proudly proclaiming that she is not God but fully the work of God in her. THIS is why we give her such devotion and prayer - anyone so favoured and graced by God is one I want to be praying for me when I am in trouble!

The Ambo

This is the eagle-shaped reading desk from which the Word of God is read and explained. In some churches it is found inside the sanctuary area or at least very close to it. This is the architectural reflection of what happened on Mt. Sinai and was maintained in the desert and in the Jerusalem Temple.

1. Having received God's Word, the Law in the form of the Ten Commandments, Moses returned to the base of Mt. Sinai to tell them to the people. At the base of the mountain he rejoins the people and there teaches them the Law of God.
2. In the desert, Moses would be permitted into the Tent of Meeting there to speak with God - when he had received all God had spoken to him, he would leave the Tent and tell the people what the Lord had commanded (*Ex. 33*). Once Aaron is consecrated High Priest, it is only he who may enter the Tent of Meeting and even Moses must remain outside: what God communicates to the one he has chosen as mediator is then relayed to the people from the entrance to the Tent of Meeting.
3. In the Jerusalem Temple, the High Priest or the King would read the Law to the assembled people on major feast days. Just after the sacrifices on the annual Day of Atonement, the High Priest would leave the sanctuary and from one of the great gates he would read out the Law for the people to hear and take to their hearts.

In our churches, the ambo is often situated on the border between the sanctuary (the source of the readings - God himself) and the nave, where the people are assembled. When the passages are read, they are then explained through the homily and the people urged to convert their lives in accordance with the Word of God. When the people of Israel returned from exile in Babylon, they rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem: when it was finished, Ezra the Priest read to the assembled people the whole Law of God, standing on a dais outside the sanctuary area itself (*Nehemiah 8*). The principle behind the arrangement is the need for the people to repent of their sins - the Law of God is given to them to help them live lives that will require no repentance. Until that time, they are not ready to enter the Holy of Holies for to do so without true inner holiness is death, unless God has given immunity for a specific reason (this is why Aaron and Moses are permitted inside - to offer sacrifice, intercession and prayer for the people)

In the New Covenant Church of Christ, this has changed radically, yet there is still an echo of the way things were. Mankind is still steeped in sin, and no one within the Church is remotely worthy in himself or herself of approaching the throne of grace, the residence of God, the tabernacle. BUT, what is different is the grace we have received through Baptism into Christ. Now the tabernacle in the sanctuary is not the only home of God, for he has chosen to share his life with us, residing within us in order to make us holy from within. Thus, we have become the new tabernacles of the Word and while still unworthy, we are being made worthy through the grace of Christ we have received. For this reason, the New Israel is able to enter into the Holy Place, which until Christ the people could never do. They stand within sight of the new altar of Showbread or the altar of the Bread of the Presence (found in the Holy Place in the Tent of Meeting and the Temple in Jerusalem, but only the Levites were permitted in there - the bread of the presence was 12 loaves to represent the 12 tribes who were not permitted to enter the Holy Place.) Now, of course, the 'Bread of the Presence' has new and deeper meaning. It does not symbolise the presence of the people (as it did in the Temple) but the Presence of God. And it is no longer a symbol but a reality – it is the Bread from Heaven - the very Presence of God himself, who changes bread and wine into his own Body and Blood. In the past, we could not enter God's presence because of our sin - now, through Christ, God enters our presence by transforming

bread and wine into his own Presence, his Body and Blood, so that we can stand before him. Now, the Law is read to us not when we are assembled outside the Tent of Meeting but when we are gathered inside it, where in the past only the priests were allowed by God to go (and then, only on certain occasions, after lengthy preparatory rituals and with considerable fear and trembling). Yet there is still the distance caused by our own sins (this is why we still do not all stand in the area of the sanctuary).

The Font

Outside the sanctuary area you will usually find the font: this is where infants and adults are baptised and receive the life of Christ, the gift of the Holy Spirit and the promise of salvation. In the Jerusalem Temple, near the altar was the massive bronze basin where the priests would prepare themselves to offer animal sacrifices to God by washing away ritual impurity and defilement. The New Testament fulfils this image. Whereas in the Old order, the defilement washed away by this cleansing was only ritual sin (incurred by daily tasks like disposing of the rubbish, cooking food etc.), in the New order established by Christ, the defilement washed away in the font of baptism is the defilement of original and actual sin (which the Old order could not touch). In the Old order, the washing was needed every day since ritual defilement was daily - in the New order the cleansing of Baptism is once only and is permanent. In the Old order, it prepared the priests to offer animal sacrifices that could not save anyone but were only figurative and symbolic of the people's repentance. In the New order, the washing of Baptism prepares us to offer the only sacrifice which can take away sin - the Passion and Resurrection of Christ which is made present on our altars in the Mass: the sacrifice of the New order is effective and salvific while the sacrifices of the Old order were bloody, repeated endlessly and powerless.

The Paschal Candle

Beside the font stands the Paschal Candle. This is blessed at the Mass of the Easter Vigil, when the whole Church celebrates Christ's resurrection. It represents Christ himself, the Light of the world. In a sense, it is THE Candle of the church building: all other candles, such as the ones on the altar, are symbols of the Paschal Candle. Just as the people of Israel were led out of slavery in Egypt by the pillar of fire (which was Christ), so the New Israel walks in faith behind the Light of the world. At the Easter Vigil, the Paschal Candle is lit outside the church and we then walk in procession behind the Candle which leads us into the church: all the lights in the church have been put out, so we walk in darkness behind the only light there is - Christ himself. Again, the Church uses Old Testament imagery to present the true meaning of Christ and the deliverance he has brought us.

The Paschal Candle is lit at all major ceremonies of our lives – at Baptism, we are given a baptismal candle, lit from the Paschal Candle to illustrate visibly what has happened spiritually (that we are now filled with Christ, the only true light - we have been illuminated by Christ), at Confirmation, when we are sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit for the work of witnessing to Christ (the fulfilment of our baptismal calling) the Candle is lit again. In the sacrament of Marriage or Ordination, the Candle is lit to show us that these ways of life are sacraments - instituted by Christ as specific

ways of living out the baptismal call. At our funeral Mass, the Paschal Candle will be lit again - as one of the primary symbols of the resurrected Christ, the Candle is supremely significant at a funeral. It is a reminder of the glorified life of Christ after his Resurrection, that he promised to share this with us in his Father's house and that we have already received the first fruits of the Resurrection through entering into Christ's life in Baptism.

The Statue of the Sacred Heart

Most Catholic churches will have statues of various saints, or devotions to Our Lord. Often there will be a statue of the Sacred Heart of Christ. This is a devotion to Christ as the forgiving redeemer. In the seventeenth century, the Catholic Church in France went through a phase of Jansenism (named after Cornelius Jansen): the basic belief centred on divine justice and wrath. They taught that God's holiness was so offended by sin that only the most pure and repentant could be saved. Jansenists were theological pessimists - fanatically rigorist, harsh in matters of discipline. They stressed the impossibility of man to do anything good, God's all-consuming hatred of all sin and sinners and taught that we should stand before God with fear and trembling – followers were too terrified to receive Holy Communion for fear of eternal damnation (for receiving unworthily). In 1653 (15 years after Jansen's death) these teachings were solemnly condemned by Pope Innocent X. This did not halt the spread of Jansenism. In 1673 an obscure nun, St. Margaret Mary Alacoque, began to receive visions of the Sacred Heart – Christ revealed to her the roaring inferno of his loving heart for mankind. Through devotion to the Saviour's pure and faithful heart, mankind has been reminded that God sent his Son because he loved the world, not despised it, and so that we should be given the opportunity to love him and so receive God's freely-given mercy. (*See Jn. 3:16-17*)

Devotion to the Sacred Heart is the crucial antidote to religious pessimism, excess rigour or puritanical fanaticism. God is Love: this is not an attribute of God but his very nature. The Sacred Heart reminds us that no matter what we do, we can never deflect God from his love for us. We may loathe, despise and reject God, but he will never reciprocate. Nothing will stop him loving us, even if we choose not to accept that love.

C. The Lay-out of a Church - the Sanctuary

The Sanctuary steps - Sinai

This is practically the last remaining vestige of the ancient image of the sacred mountain. So often in the Old Testament, when man was to communicate with God he ascended to a high place. The ancient Greeks believed that the gods lived on Mt. Olympus at the summit of the mountain, wreathed in smoke. Ancient Jews did not have the same belief, and yet God was to be found in the isolated places - deserts, wildernesses and mountains. The instances of God revealing himself at the top of a mountain in the Old Testament are legion –

- Noah sacrifices to God at the top of Mt. Ararat (where the ark comes to rest);
- Abraham is instructed by God to offer sacrifice to him at the top of Mt. Moriah (later renamed Mt. Zion); God substitutes a ram for his son, Isaac;
- Moses first encounters God in the burning bush on Mt. Horeb (or Sinai), and when he receives the Law from God, he is again on Mt. Sinai.
- When David establishes his capital and the site for the Tabernacle and the sacrifices to God it is at the top of Mt. Zion;
- When the northern 10 tribes split from Jerusalem and the Temple in the time of David's grandchildren, they establish their own holy place - Mt. Gerizim.
- When Elijah meets God in the still, small voice of calm, it is on Mt. Horeb.
- Elijah calls down fire from heaven to demonstrate that the Lord alone is God on the altars at the top of Mt. Carmel,
- The mountain becomes an image of God's own home - Paradise: *Isaiah 11:6-9 & 25:6-8*,
- Mt. Zion and the Temple of Jerusalem are God's home on earth, his residence: *Ps. 48:1, Ps. 68:16-17*

Mountains are sacred because they take you out of the plain of daily life. They force you to leave behind the mundane chores of life to rise above them and concentrate on things deeper. Physically they do what spiritually we are yearning for - to rise above our fears and worries. For a while, the mountain takes us above purely secular concerns and faces us with heaven and God.

The Jerusalem Temple was a scaled-down version of the mountain of Sinai - to reach the altar of sacrifice the Jew would have to scale the great stairway to the Hulda gates (a massive stairway several hundred feet wide). Then he would proceed on through the gates and up more stairs into the Court of the Gentiles. The sanctuary itself was raised up a further fourteen steps, on its own terrace above the Court of the Gentiles from which rose the great wall of the sanctuary. These were 65 feet high, made of white stone overlaid with gold - standing high above any other building in Jerusalem and rising as a single pinnacle, viewers noted that it could be seen from miles away, and the reflected sunlight made it resemble a mountain top, covered with snow!) The 9 gates leading to the inside of the sanctuary were each raised up 5 steps from the terrace: they led to the Court of the Women, from which a flight of 15 steps led to the Court of Israel. Here, on a raised platform (the Court of the Priests) the sacrifices were performed: the great altar was a rectangle, 82 feet along each side, which rose in steps to the top where the animals were burned. Behind the altar was the Temple sanctuary itself - the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies. It was a massive structure, entered up a further 12 steps.

To reach the heart of the Temple was no less than climbing a mountain, as it had been for Moses. Pilgrims when coming to Jerusalem for the great festival of Passover

would pray the 15 Psalms of Ascent as they slowly wound up the trails towards the mountain range on which Jerusalem is built:

- *"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." (Isaiah 2:3)*

When we celebrate the Mass these days, we still literally 'go up' to the altar of our God: symbolically, we acknowledge that what we are doing rises above the details of the lives we live and touches the sublime. Our worship of God places us in communion with realities of which we are usually insensible but which we consciously acknowledge and renew our awareness of in the Mass.

The Sanctuary Lamp

When Israel was wandering through the desert, led by Moses, God was their true guide. His presence was indicated in a number of ways, but chief among them was the pillar of cloud, which went before them in the day, and the pillar of fire at night. The image of being guided by God as one might by a light in the darkness is constant and repeated in the Scriptures. In a beautiful passage, the psalmist says about the Law of God:

- *"Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Ps. 119:105)*

The full significance of this line would only be apparent with the revelation that the true Word of God (which illuminates the path of the believer) is Christ himself. The presence of the Lord is like a constantly burning lamp so that those who wish to see may draw comfort from the light and walk in the direction of life. This is a theme that St. John develops, especially in his Gospel –

- *Jn. 1:4-5 "In him (the Word) was life and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it."*
- *Jn. 3:19-21 "And this is judgement, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does what is true comes to the light, that it might be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God."*

The association with the presence of God and the appearance of light is not just poetic - it is one of the associated signs of his presence in the Holy of Holies through the Holy Spirit. When God descends on the Tent of Meeting, it is in the glory cloud of his holiness, the brilliant light of which fills the Tent –

- *"On the day that the tabernacle was set up, the cloud covered the Tabernacle, the Tent of the testimony; and at evening it was over the Tabernacle like the appearance of fire until morning." (Numbers 9:15)*

Whenever God appears to Moses or to Aaron it is with the glory of his divinity: it is so bright that Moses' face glows afterwards - and whenever he appears, his glory is seen shining like a blazing light.

It was with this background that sanctuary lamps were lit in churches. They refer directly to the presence of Christ in the tabernacle, as the light in the Tent of Meeting referred to the presence of God through his Holy Spirit in the tablets of the Law in the Ark and on the mercy seat, God's throne, which was above the Ark. The Church saw the presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament (in the tabernacle) as being foreshadowed by the presence of God in the tablets of the Law (in the Old Tabernacle). In the same way, God's presence is shown for those with eyes to see, through the discrete burning of the sanctuary lamp at the side of the sanctuary. While the outward sign pointing to the presence of God is less dramatic and brilliant in the New Dispensation, the Presence of God to which it points is greater and is lasting, not transient. When we see the sanctuary lamp, we should be reminded of the great appearances of God in the Old Testament and the blazing glory that accompanied it.

The Tabernacle

For Moses and the people of Israel, the tabernacle was a familiar word. They used it to denote the whole structure of the Tent of Meeting (i.e., the Holy Place as well as the Holy of Holies). Within the tabernacle were the objects symbolic of the presence of God or the actual vehicles of the presence of God:

THE HOLY PLACE - only the Levites could enter here

- The Altar of Incense: here incense was burned as an offering to God. Its sweet smell was a symbol of purity and holiness. More than that, herbs were added to make the smoke rise vertically - the smoke was a reminder of the glory cloud of smoke that revealed the presence of God and accompanied him, but also it was a symbol of the prayers of the people of Israel and of their repentance from sin.
- Altar of Showbread (of the Presence): twelve loaves of unleavened bread were placed here as a symbol of the tribes of Israel. They were necessary because the tribes themselves were unworthy to come into the Holy Place themselves - so a symbol of the people is placed before God's presence.
- Minora: the great 7-branched candlestick that represented the holiness of God and the covenant between God and man.

THE HOLY OF HOLIES - only the High Priest could enter here. The only object inside the Holy of Holies was the Ark of the Covenant - a great box which itself contained:

- The Tablets of the Ten Commandments: the very Word of God, the holy Law which God's hand had carved on stone and which was given to Moses.

- A jar containing manna: this was the bread with which God fed his people in the desert when they complained they would die of starvation.
- The rod of Aaron: his staff, sign of his authority. When his leadership of Israel together with Moses, was questioned God showed who he had invested with divine authority by causing his staff (and his alone) to sprout buds, and flower.

The Holy of Holies was the holiest place on earth - it was the place God had chosen to dwell among his people. On the lid of the Ark, in which these objects were stored, were two carved angels, their wings touching. This is called the Mercy Seat - God's throne on earth: when he comes down to speak to Moses or Aaron, smoke and fire fills the Holy of Holies and God takes up his throne. In this place the people of Israel placed the holiest objects they had been given. It was God's own house among them.

- *NOTE - all the objects within the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies have their completion in the Church of the New Testament. In the HOLY PLACE - **The Altar of Incense**: we still burn incense (not on an altar) as a sign of the prayers of the Church and the saints rising to the presence of the Father (cf Revelation 8:1-4). **The Altar of Showbread (of the Presence)**: the bread of the Presence is now the Bread of Heaven, the Bread which is the presence of GOD, the consecrated Bread which is the Body and Blood of Christ himself. **The Minora**: in every church you will find the great candle which represents the new covenant between God and man, forged through the blood of the Son - this is the Paschal Candle, representing Christ himself. **The two Tablets of the Law**: the Word of God carved in stone is replaced by the Word of God given in the flesh, Jesus Christ THE Word of God proclaimed in the Scriptures and received in the Sacrament. **The Jar of Manna**: Christ himself says that this bread is only a preparation for the REAL Bread from Heaven that is his own Body and Blood - the true Bread from Heaven is reserved for our adoration and reception in the locked Tabernacle. **The Rod of Aaron** (sign of his authority as High Priest over Israel which, although dead wood, is made to flower and produce life): - the early Church saw the cross as the sign of Christ's Priesthood as he offers his sacrifice on the cross, and they recognised it as the Tree of Life, since it has become the source of life for all who believe in him - the cross is the essential visible image of Christ in every church.*

The word "tabernacle" appears in the New Testament. It is used to denote that place where God chooses to reside among his people, as in the Old Testament: only now, the tabernacle is no longer a place but a person. St. John describes the Incarnation and birth of Christ, the God/man, with this very deliberate phrase: *"The Word was made flesh and tabernacled among us."* (Jn. 1:14). He deliberately links the presence of Christ among us to the presence of God to Israel in the desert - showing that the former is the completion and fulfillment of the latter. The tabernacle of the Tent of Meeting and the tabernacle of the Temple point to an even greater form of God's presence among his people. It is particularly poignant because the Ark was lost when Jerusalem fell to Babylon in 587 B.C. When St. John was writing, the tabernacle in the Temple was an empty room. In contrast, we have Christ, the New Tabernacle - a man in whom all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, full of grace and truth. He is the one prefigured by the tabernacle of the Old order for in Christ, God not only comes to man - he becomes man, taking human nature himself, setting up God's residence not among men but within them. The New Tabernacle is not a box containing the Word of God carved in stone but a human being who IS the Word of God, the eternal Word spoken by the Father from the very beginning. The New Tabernacle, Jesus Christ is truly Emmanuel - "God-with-us".

For this reason, when the Church came to reflect on the mystery of the Real Presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament of the Mass, she took the term 'tabernacle' and used it to refer to the box in which the Sacrament, Christ himself, is reserved in the

Church. Here we come into the very presence of God himself, not symbolically or through the medium of words carved on stone, but actually and substantially in the Blessed Sacrament.

The Altar

Standing in front of the Holy Place was the altar of sacrifice. Here Moses and later Aaron and other priests of Levi would offer the animal sacrifices laid down by the Law. With the coming of Christ, the Great High Priest, all the animal sacrifices of the Old order have been superceded. They were there only to remind the Jews of the false gods they had worshipped in Egypt and later; the people had to sacrifice cattle, sheep and goats because these were the images of the false gods they had sought after. NOW, these animal sacrifices are redundant - BUT sacrifice is not. Priests are needed for sacrifice: if Christ is eternally High Priest, he must be eternally offering sacrifice to the Father. He offers his own blood to God, innocent and pure, as an unending sacrificial gift of love. It is not that he offers his death on the cross again and again, but that the one offering of Calvary is unending and perpetual (this we see in Rev. 5 when St. John, writing perhaps as early as 68 A.D or as late as in the 90s, sees Christ as a Lamb, standing on an altar in heaven, alive but looking as though it had been slain - this is the Risen Christ bearing the marks of his passion on his glorified body, offering that passion to the Father; i.e., Christ is still offering it in 68/90 A.D.). An eternal Priest needs an eternal sacrifice. The altar we use in Church is there for our participation in that eternal, perpetual sacrifice. Calvary was bloody and mortal - the celebration of the Mass does not repeat Calvary or add to it: the new sacrifice is unbloody and life giving. We join with Christ in offering to the Father the perpetual gift of Christ's death and resurrection.

In the altar of sacrifice in the Temple and outside the tent of Meeting, the burnt offerings were rarely wholly consumed by the flames. Usually, a portion was burned up, while another part was retained and eaten as a sign of renewed communion between God and man. The New Sacrifice, which is our liturgical participation in the sacrifice of Christ, is completed when the Sacred Victim (Christ) is offered to the people by the Priest standing behind the visible priest (i.e., by Christ himself). We eat from the altar of sacrifice and this deepens and restores our bond of communion with Christ.

Altars are consecrated: this means they are anointed with chrism when they are dedicated. This is done only to people and objects that in a special way represent Christ. Newly baptised babies are anointed with chrism because they now share Christ's priestly, prophetic and royal nature. The confirmed are sealed with the gift of the Spirit through anointing with chrism because they are now filled with the Spirit of Christ to share more fully in Christ's mission of evangelisation and spreading the Good News. Priests' hands are anointed with chrism because they are to act in the person of Christ when they offer the Mass, Christ's sacrifice liturgically made present. ALTARS are consecrated with chrism because they represent Christ in a unique way: here Christ makes himself present as Priest and Victim.

On the four corners of the altar and at the centre of the altar you will find a cross - five crosses to represent the five great wounds of Christ (hands, feet and side): it is not just that Christ is the victim who is offered, or that Christ is the true Priest who offers the sacrifice - Christ is also the foundation of the offering: we take part in the sacrifice

only because we already share his life through Baptism. If it wasn't for the life of Christ already within us, we could not offer the sacrifice with and in him. Christ is the ground on which the sacrifice is offered - in a way, he is our altar, the only sacred place in us that legitimises our involvement in this sacrifice. Hence, the altar of our church is marked with the wounds of his body, because the altar represents Christ.

The altar is kissed at the beginning and at the end of Mass because it represents Christ AND because of the relics it contains. The veneration of relics is an ancient Christian custom that today many find grotesque and gruesome. It is not in the slightest gruesome to those societies who face persecution and martyrdom. Nearly every culture that has been persecuted has treasured relics of some sort because they are strengthening. We are powerfully urged never to give in and apostasise our faith when we have not just the stories of the martyrs but also the remains of the martyrs close by. In the early Church, when martyrdom was a constant threat and converts were warned off entering the Church by stories of what happened to those who had been caught, the air was thick with persecution, sacrifice for the faith in Christ etc. In these times, the bodies of the martyred were afforded tremendous honour - the community would gather the bodies, or whatever remained, so as to bury them in the catacombs. Over the tops of the tombs (which were like shelf-alcoves in the wall), the early Christians would celebrate the Mass. There is nothing morbid or grotesque in this - the martyrs had preferred death to denying Christ, as Christ had offered his own life for the sake of the Truth. Fervent in the hope of the Resurrection, the Christians would gather to celebrate the Sacrament of Christ's sacrifice and receive the True Bread which gives us eternal life - *"If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give is my flesh for the life of the world; ... he who eats my flesh and drinks my Blood has eternal life and I shall raise him up at the last day."* (Jn. 6:51,54). The Church began from the earliest days to prize the earthly remains of those who died for the faith because they spoke very powerfully of the new life that Christ offered in the Mass. So, the custom quickly became general practice - Mass was to be celebrated over the relics of the saints. This is still the case in most Catholic churches: it reminds us of the history of the Church, of the suffering of past generations which has enabled the faith to survive to our generation and of the real communion which exists between the saints in heaven and the Church on earth, especially when we celebrate Mass (this is what we refer to in the Apostles Creed in the phrase "the communion of saints" - our unity with them in worshipping around the altar in heaven where the crucified and glorified Lord continues to offer his Passion to the Father).

The Presidential Chair

The chair from which the priest presides over the assembly of the People of God is not just a piece of furniture. It represents many things:

1. The chair of Moses: Christ uses this phrase to refer to the teaching authority of the Pharisees - they *"sit on the chair of Moses; so practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do; for they preach but do not practice."* (Mt. 23:1-3). His words are interesting - because the Pharisees have inherited the office of teachers in Israel, the people can trust and MUST obey the laws of God as they are taught by the Pharisees (all this despite the fact that Christ regards these very teachers as brood of vipers, blind guides,

hypocrites, whitewashed sepulchres etc all immediately after telling the people to obey their teaching!). They have inherited the office established by God through Moses of the judges and teachers of Israel. In the desert, Moses is urged to appoint a judge from each tribe to judge the many legal cases that are arising - they are given a share in Moses wisdom so that they can give true and just verdicts. They interpret and apply the law of God, showing the people how to live and punishing any transgression (*Ex. 18:13-27*). The idea of chair is figurative - it simply implies an office which is inherited and which means the administration of real authority. The occupiers of the 12 thrones of Israel must be obeyed in their judgements concerning the meaning of the Law. When Christ calls the twelve apostles, he invests them with this authority: he promises them twelve thrones from which they will judge the twelve tribes of Israel (*Mt. 19:28*). Their successors, the bishops, inherit this office (just as Moses' authority was inherited through the centuries) and interpret authoritatively for us the Law of God. The presidential chair of the Church is a sign of this authority surviving to this day - the one who sits in it is empowered by God through the bishop to declare authoritatively the meaning of God's holy Law.

2. Authority: from the earliest times, peoples have used official seats as a sign of authority (royal thrones etc.). In Roman law, only one who was given the Roman imperium (authority to govern in the name of the people of Rome) was permitted to make legal decisions – the sign of this authority was a special chair on which he would sit to give official judgements. When he sat before the people, it was the indication that his judgements were official and authoritative. This is why, when Pontius Pilate delivers his verdict at the fiasco of Christ's trial, it says "*he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judgement seat at a place called the Pavement.*" (*Jn. 19:13*). This was good Roman legal practice, with the governor sitting to preside in law over his subjects. The priest does not deliver judgements in civil or criminal cases, but he is appointed to teach the faith with the authority of a governor - to determine what is consistent with the apostolic faith and to lead his people with Christ's priestly authority.
3. The true Priest of the Church is *CHRIST*. The presidential chair is first and foremost the throne of Christ, High Priest. It is Christ who presides over the Church through his anointed and ordained ministers.
4. The local head of the Church is the bishop (in union with the Holy Father). The bishop is the apostle of the local Church, the successor to the College of the Twelve. He is the High Priest of the diocese, the effective sign of Christ the High Priest. The presidential chair is a representation of our true human priest - the bishop. The parish priest of the parish is only sent as the representative of the bishop, to stand in his place and administer the sacraments as he would (and the apostles before him) if he were present.
5. The priest is appointed by the bishop as *Father* of the local family of the Church. He is their head and their teacher. He is their mediator (because he is the sacramental sign of Christ, the only mediator). He administers the goods of the local community and distributes them to those who need them. He is also the one who leads them in prayer: it is in the worship of the Church that the

priest most fully expresses who he is called to be - head, shepherd, representative of Christ (to the people), representative of the people (to God). The chair symbolises all this.

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