



DIOCESE OF LINCOLN

OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

December 12, 2021
Gaudete Sunday

Reverend and dear Monsignors and Fathers,

Greetings in the Lord!

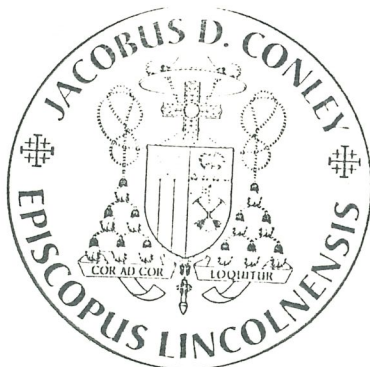
One of the most beautiful Rites of the Church is the Dedication of an Altar, in which Christ, through a Bishop, sets apart and elevates this ‘work of human hands’ to be the surface upon which our Lord’s Sacrifice is made present. Love is made visible in the presence of the Sacred Host confectioned upon this Altar.

The Altar therefore becomes the central focus of the most sublime worship known to man. The Rite of Dedication of an Altar teaches beautifully:

“The Christian Altar is by its very nature a unique table of sacrifice and of the paschal banquet: a unique altar on which the Sacrifice of the Cross is perpetuated in mystery throughout the ages until Christ comes; a table at which the Church’s sons and daughters are gathered to give thanks to God and to receive the Body and Blood of Christ.”

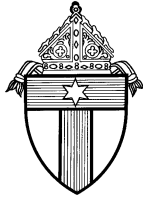
It is for this reason that I am pleased to communicate to you a policy regarding altars in our diocese. Because of the centrality and importance of this furnishing in our sanctuaries, it is my desire that there be harmony within the diocese regarding its expression, to avoid any dissonance which can arise due to conflicting opinions.

Entrusting the entire diocese to our Blessed Mother, Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Star of the New Evangelization, with my prayers for you, I remain



Sincerely yours in Christ,

The Most Rev. James D. Conley
Bishop of Lincoln



ALTAR POLICY OF THE DIOCESE OF LINCOLN

“Everywhere, in varying circumstances, the church’s sons and daughters can celebrate the memorial of Christ and take their place at the Lord’s table. Nevertheless, it is in keeping with the eucharistic mystery that the Christian faithful should erect a stable altar for celebrating the Lord’s Supper, something that has been done from the earliest times.

“The Christian Altar is by its very nature a unique table of sacrifice and of the paschal banquet: a unique altar on which the Sacrifice of the Cross is perpetuated in mystery throughout the ages until Christ comes; a table at which the Church’s sons and daughters are gathered to give thanks to God and to receive the Body and Blood of Christ.

“In every church, then, the altar ‘is the center of thanksgiving that is accomplished through the Eucharist’¹ around which the Church’s other rites are, in a certain manner, ordered.”²

“Because it is at the altar that the memorial of the Lord is celebrated and his Body and Blood given to the faithful, it came to pass that the Church’s writers see in the altar a sign of Christ himself—hence the saying arose: ‘The altar is Christ.’^{3,4}

1. CONCERNING THE MATERIAL OF THE ALTAR

- 1.1 The altar of sacrifice is a sign of Christ⁵ and should occupy a place in the sanctuary where it is truly the center toward which the attention of the whole congregation of the faithful naturally turns.⁶
- 1.2 The altar should be made with the finest materials and express noble beauty.
- 1.3 In keeping with the Church’s tradition, preference should be given for the *mensa* of the altar to be made of stone and indeed of natural stone. In the dioceses of the United States, wood that is dignified, solid and well-crafted may be used, provided that the altar is structurally immobile. The supports or base of the altar may be made of any material, provided it is dignified and solid.⁷

¹*The Roman Missal*, Third Typical Edition, General Instruction, no. 296.

² Cf. 1 Corinthians 10: 16-17.

³ *The Roman Missal*, Third Typical Edition, Common of Martyrs, II. During Easter Time, A. For Several Martyrs, 1, Prayer over the Offerings.

⁴ *Dedication of a Church and an Altar*, Chapter 4, Dedication of an Altar, #4

⁵ Cf. *Dedication of a Church and an Altar*, Chapter 4, Dedication of an Altar, #4

⁶ Cf. GIRM #299

⁷ Cf. GIRM #301.

2. CONCERNING THE PLACEMENT OF THE ALTAR⁸

- 2.1 “In new churches it is preferable to erect only a single altar, so that in the one assembly of the faithful the one altar may be a sign of our one Saviour Jesus Christ and the one Eucharist of the Church.”⁹
- a) “Nevertheless, in a chapel, if possible separated to a certain extent from the main body of the church where the tabernacle for the reservation of the Most Blessed Sacrament is situated, another altar may be erected where Mass also can be celebrated on weekdays for a small assembly of the faithful.”¹⁰
 - b) “The erection of several altars in a church merely for the sake of adornment must be entirely avoided.”¹¹
 - c) “In new churches, statues and pictures of Saints may not be placed above the altar.”¹²
 - i) “Likewise relics of saints should not be placed on the table of the altar when they are exposed for the veneration of the people.”¹³
 - ii) “A reliquary must not be placed on the altar or in the table of the altar, but under the table of the altar in a manner suitable to the design of the altar.”¹⁴
- 2.2 “The altar should be built separate from the wall, in such a way that the Priest can easily walk around it and celebrate Mass facing the people. ‘The altar should occupy a place where it is truly the center to which the attention of the whole congregation of the faithful naturally turns.’¹⁵”¹⁶
- 2.3 The altar’s importance should be accented architecturally and artistically. Some practical examples of how an altar could be accented include (but are not limited to) : (1) elevating the altar platform above the rest of the sanctuary floor; (2) using contrasting flooring materials or coloring for the altar platform; (3) adding artistic designs to the flooring around the altar; (4) adding a baldacchino or tester over the altar; (5) placing ornate candlesticks on or around the altar; (6) etc..

⁸ Cf.: *Dedication of a Church and an Altar*, Chapter 4, Dedication of an Altar, paragraphs 6-11.

⁹ *Dedication of a Church and an Altar*, Chapter 4, Dedication of an Altar, 7

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, no. 10. “The altar by its very nature is dedicated to the one God, for the Eucharistic Sacrifice is offered to the one God. It is in this sense that the Church’s custom of dedicating altars to God in honor of the Saints must be understood. Saint Augustine expresses it well: ‘It is not to any of the Martyrs, but to the Very God of the Martyrs, albeit in memory of the Martyrs, that we raise our altars.’ This must be made clear to the faithful. In new churches, statues and pictures of Saints may not be placed above the altar.”

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 11c.

¹⁵ GIRM, no. 299.

¹⁶ *Dedication of a Church and an Altar*, Chapter 4, Dedication of an Altar, 8.; GIRM., no. 299.

3. CONCERNING THE ADORNMENT OF THE ALTAR

- 3.1. “Moderation should be observed in the decoration of the altar.”¹⁷
- 3.2 “During Advent the floral decoration of the altar should be marked by a moderation suited to the character of this time of year, without expressing in anticipation the full joy of the Nativity of the Lord. During Lent it is forbidden for the altar to be decorated with flowers. Exceptions, however, are Laetare Sunday (Fourth Sunday of Lent), Solemnities, and Feasts.”¹⁸
- a) “Floral decoration should always show moderation and be arranged around the altar rather than on the altar table.”¹⁹
- 3.3 “[O]nly what is required for the celebration of the Mass may be placed on the altar table: namely, from the beginning of the celebration until the proclamation of the Gospel, the Book of the Gospels; then from the Presentation of the Gifts until the purification of the vessels, the chalice with the paten, a ciborium, if necessary, and, finally, the corporal, the purificator, the pall, and the Missal.”²⁰
- a) “In addition, arranged discreetly, there should be whatever may be needed to amplify the Priest’s voice.”²¹
- 3.4 “The candlesticks required for the different liturgical services for reasons of reverence or the festive character of the celebration (cf. GIRM no. 117) should be appropriately placed either on the altar or around it, according to the design of the altar and the sanctuary, so that the whole may be harmonious and the faithful may not be impeded from a clear view of what takes place at the altar or what is placed upon it.”²²
- 3.5 “Likewise, either on the altar or near it, there is to be a cross, with the figure of Christ crucified upon it, a cross clearly visible to the assembled people. It is desirable that such a cross should remain near the altar even outside of liturgical celebrations, so as to call to mind for the faithful the saving Passion of the Lord.”²³

4. PARTICULAR POLICY OF THE DIOCESE OF LINCOLN

- 4.1 In the Diocese of Lincoln, parochial churches are to follow the general norms of the GIRM, and are to have a freestanding altar.

¹⁷ GIRM, 305.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 306.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 307.

²³ *Ibid.*, 308.

- 4.2 In the Diocese of Lincoln, in churches that already have a high altar, the high altar should be retained in order to maintain its artistic value and the church's original architectural design.²⁴
- 4.3 In churches where the original high altar was removed, a high altar may be reinstalled in order to restore the church's original architectural design.
- 4.3 In those parochial churches without a freestanding altar, (i.e., a high altar alone) a freestanding altar is to be installed provided it is not financially or artistically detrimental to the Parochial Church. Care is to be taken that the freestanding altar and high altar are similar in design so as to provide harmony to the sanctuary.
- 4.4 The express written permission from the Ordinary and consent from the Liturgical Commission are required for a parochial church not to have a freestanding altar.

²⁴ Cf. *Ibid.* #303 and Cardinal Estevez response listed above (Prot. N° 2036/00/L published in *Notitiae*), "When it is a question of ancient churches, or of great artistic value, it is appropriate, moreover, to keep in mind civil legislation regarding changes or renovations. Adding another altar may not always be a worthy solution."