



**Step-by-Step Walk Through the Mass
Do This in Remembrance of Me, Part 5:
Altar Kiss
By FR. LUKE SPANNAGEL**



Why is Father kissing that table? Have you noticed that, during the entrance hymn or antiphon, the celebrant approaches the altar and kisses it? Why does he do that? As Charles Belmonte explains in his book, *Understanding the Mass*: “As a sign of veneration, the priest and deacon (if there is one present) kiss the altar... The altar symbolizes the heart of the Church. It is the Lord’s table and the center of the Eucharistic action. It has always been considered a symbol of Christ. That is why we cover the altar with a cloth, out of reverence for the celebration of the memorial of the Lord’s sacrifice.” (*Understanding the Mass*, p. 49).

What Is the Significance of a Catholic Altar?

According to the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, “altar” comes from the Hebrew word meaning “place of sacrifice” (*Catholic Encyclopedia*, p. 31). Perhaps this reminds us of the many altars erected throughout the Old Testament where sacrifices were offered to God. Altars were erected in special places where the people had an encounter with God, which then became places of prayer. This background leads us to the current altars in our churches, where the Sacrifice of the Mass is celebrated and we encounter Christ truly present in the Eucharist. We call the Mass a sacrifice because we are given an opportunity to share in the one perfect sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Jesus Christ—body, blood, soul, and divinity—becomes present during the Eucharistic Prayer at Mass. Jesus Christ, God Himself, is present there with us! No wonder we give the altar special honor as the place where we encounter Christ dwelling among us!

More Than A Simple Gesture

As Belmonte continues, “To kiss the altar is to kiss Christ. It is then understandable that we want to make ours this kiss of the celebrant. It evokes in our memory the many kisses of that sinful woman in the Pharisee’s house. She could not cease to kiss Christ’s feet, washing them with her tears. Great sins were forgiven her because she loved so greatly (Lk 7:38). And we have so many faults to ask pardon for! Now, by this kiss, the priest also signifies the union of the Spouse (Christ) with his Bride (the Church)... What the priest is beginning to accomplish here is nothing other than to forge the union of the Church with her Master, of the soul with its Redeemer” (*Understanding the Mass*, p. 49). As you may realize, kissing the altar is more than a simple gesture!

Relics of Those Who Have Gone Before Us

Given the dignity of the altar, it is fittingly constructed in a special way. “In keeping with the Church’s traditional practice and with what the altar signifies, the table of a fixed altar should be of stone and indeed of natural stone. In the Dioceses of the United States of America, wood which is dignified, solid, and well-crafted may be used, provided the altar is structurally immobile” (GIRM, no. 301). Altars typically also have a special set-in stone that contains the relic of a saint. The relic is usually a small bone fragment from one of the martyrs or perhaps a saint that is the patron or namesake for a particular church building. The tradition of the relic can be traced back to the first centuries of Masses celebrated at the burial places of the martyrs or in the catacombs.

For me as a priest, I often think of the saint at the altar and about his or her life and faithfulness to Christ. I think about how the witness of faith helps to strengthen us now. I remember that the intercession of the saints assists us in our own day. In celebrating Mass this way, there is a special connection between the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ and the way the Eucharist strengthened that particular saint—to say the least, a great reminder of how the Eucharist strengthens us for holy and faithful life in Christ!