

**Homily for the Dedication of An Altar
August 31, 2013**

**St. James Parish
St. Jacob, Illinois**

**+ Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

Father Jakel, Father Kennedy, Deacon Crosby, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, in our second reading from the Letter to the Hebrews, we hear these words: “you have approached Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.” (Heb 12:22) These words express very well what happens to us each time we attend Mass. We join the angels and saints in Heaven in giving thanks to God for the sacrifice of His Son through which we have been redeemed. It has often been said that at the Mass, Heaven and earth meet.

While every celebration of the Mass is indeed special, we have extra cause for rejoicing today as we dedicate a new altar in this church of St. James in St. Jacob. It is upon this altar that the Mass will be celebrated today and every Sunday hereafter. In the Mass, “we share in a foretaste of that heavenly liturgy which is celebrated in the Holy City of Jerusalem toward which we journey as pilgrims.”¹ Because of its essential connection

to the celebration of the Mass, which is at the center of our lives as Catholics, the dedication of an altar is of great importance.

In the Old Testament, the altar was the place where sacrifices were offered on a daily basis. One of the purposes of these sacrifices was to attempt to restore humanity's relationship with God, which had been lost through the disobedience of Adam and Eve. This distance from God resulting from their sin is shown by their being placed outside of the Garden of Eden which represents where God dwells. The various sacrifices of the Israelites were an attempt to try to close that gap between God and His people, but none of those sacrifices could perfectly accomplish this goal, thus the need to repeat them over and over. In the fullness of time, though, God sent His Son into the world to offer Himself as the perfect sacrifice that would finally restore that friendship between God and man. This sacrifice took place on Good Friday as Christ was crucified and died on the Cross. On the night before His Passion, Christ instituted the Eucharist as the means of allowing us to continue to share in the effects of that sacrifice by our partaking in His Body and Blood in the forms of bread and wine. Like the Passover, which celebrated the saving

actions of God as He freed His people from slavery in Egypt and led them on their journey to the Promised Land, the true saving event of Christ's Last Supper and Passion are to be repeated until His return at the end of time. These events are made present to us each time the Mass is celebrated at the altar. The altar, then, is at the heart of our celebration of this great mystery of our salvation. The Catechism of the Catholic Church sums this all up in its description of the altar, where we read: "The altar, around which the Church is gathered in the celebration of the Eucharist, represents the two aspects of the same mystery: the altar of the sacrifice and the table of the Lord."² The rite of dedication of the altar highlights these two aspects of this mystery in various ways.

First of all, there will be a special prayer of dedication by which this altar will be set aside for the sacred purpose of the celebration of the Mass where the sacrifice of the Cross is made present to us and where we gather at the table of the Lord. After this prayer, the altar will be anointed with Sacred Chrism. This holy oil, which I consecrated this past March during Holy Week at the Chrism Mass in our cathedral in Springfield, is normally used on people as a sign of their anointing as members sharing in the life of

Christ through the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Orders. It is also used for the dedication of an altar which is a symbol of Christ, the Anointed One, who offered on the altar, of His Body the sacrifice for the salvation of all.³ Following the anointing, incense will be burned on the altar “to signify that Christ’s sacrifice...ascends to God as an odor of sweetness, and also to signify that the people’s prayers rise up pleasing and acceptable, reaching the throne of God.”⁴ Next, the altar is covered with a white cloth, indicating that the altar is table of the Lord where the Eucharistic meal is celebrated and we receive the gift of the divine food as our spiritual nourishment.⁵ Finally, the candles at the altar are lit. Since the altar is a symbol of Christ, the light signifies that Christ is the “light of the world.” (Jn 9:5) The prayer for the lighting of the altar also reminds us, who share in His life through Baptism and the Eucharist, to let the light of Christ reflect in the way that we live our lives.

All of these symbols help us to better grasp the significance and meaning of the altar that stands at the center of our worship in the celebration of the Eucharist. Relatively few Catholics have the privilege of witnessing what you are about to experience in the dedication of this altar.

On such a special day, we should not miss the opportunity to reflect on the meaning of the Eucharist in our lives. After all, the greater focus of this Mass is not the dedication, but what follows the dedication, the celebration of the Mass. In his homily for the Feast of the Body and Blood of Christ, *Corpus Christi*, Pope Francis offers a wonderful reflection on what it means to live the Eucharist in our daily lives. He encourages us to consider what type of impact our relationship with Christ, strengthened through the Eucharist, has on us. He encourages us to ask ourselves the following questions: “[D]o I let myself be transformed by Him? Do I let the Lord who gives Himself to me, guide me to come out more and more from my little fence, to get out and be not afraid to give, to share, to love Him and others?”⁶ We are called to approach our reception of the Eucharist as a sacred encounter with the Christ who loves us and desires for us to walk away from each Mass with a greater love for Him and for others in our hearts.

May our celebration of the dedication of this altar renew within each and every one of us a greater desire to draw close to our Lord and to follow Him more eagerly and with greater devotion. May the light of His

presence, dwelling within us through this sacred gift, shine forth in how we live our lives and how we serve others, so that more and more people may be attracted by that light which is a beacon that leads those who follow it to “the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.” (Heb 12:22).

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ CCC 1090

² CCC 1383

³ Cf. *Dedication of a Church and an Altar*, ch. 4, *Dedication of an Altar* (hereafter *DA*), no. 22.

⁴ *DA*, no. 22

⁵ *DA*, no. 22

⁶ Pope Francis, Homily for the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ, 30 May 2013.