A HOUSE OF PRAYER
FOR THE CHURCH

by Eliot Kapitan

Human beings are always making things. A project begins with a glimmer, an idea of what the finished product will become. The bigger the project, the more complex are the tasks to complete it. Until all the tasks are done, however, one cannot fully appreciate what is being built. This is true for a new home, a new public building, or a new city. But once built, it in turn builds and shapes the users.

HOW THE CHURCH PRAYS

It is not often a parish community gets to construct a new church building or do a major renovation on an existing one. Planning and building done well can do much to shape parishioners’ self-understanding of what it means to be Church, God’s holy People.

Once the preparation and building is complete for a new parish church, the Bishop comes on the first day the building will be used for Mass to celebrate the Rite of Dedication of a Church and an Altar. It is a festive day, long in coming, and greatly anticipated by the parishioners. The Church’s Liturgy matches the people’s energy with a celebration filled with power, imagery, and grace.

The Bishop, without miter and with hands extended, stands at the new and yet unused altar and prays:

Father in heaven, ...today we come before you, to dedicate to your lasting service this house of prayer, this temple of worship, this home in which we are nourished by your word and your sacraments. Here is reflected the mystery of the Church....

The Church is favored, the dwelling place of God on earth: a temple built of living stones, founded on the apostles with Jesus Christ its corner stone.... From here may the whole world clothed in the dignity of the children of God, enter with gladness your city of peace.

Prayer of Dedication
Dedication of a Church and an Altar, Chapter II, no. 62.

WHAT THE CHURCH BELIEVES BY PRAYING

The Church is too great a mystery to be completely unfolded in one celebration, even one as wonderful as the Dedication of a Church and an Altar. But those who have the privilege to take part in a dedication rite can glean the following truths:

- This physical house, temple, home (church) is set aside for worship and for prayer.
- This worship of God and celebration of the Sacraments takes place in the domus Dei, a worthy home of God on earth who is worthy of all praise.
- This physical house is the domus ecclesiae, a home for the People of God (Church).
- This People of God is a vibrant temple of the Spirit built of living stones (see 1 Peter 2:4-9).
- The prayer of the Church in this dedicated house prepares us for the New Jerusalem (city of peace) which is our post-resurrection home with God for eternity.
WHAT THE CHURCH LEARNS BY BELIEVING

Built of Living Stones states it well: “Every church building is a gathering place for the assembly, a resting place, a place of encounter with God, as well as a point of departure on the Church’s unfinished journey toward the reign of God” [no. 17]. The Church shapes the church which in turn shapes the Church by the quality of liturgical prayer celebrated within the walls.

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

Official Texts.

VATICAN COUNCIL II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church.


Catechism of the Catholic Church, nos. 751-757, 117.


Other Helpful Texts and Commentaries.


Popular Texts.


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