

THE ALTAR

The word “altar” comes from a Latin word that means “to burn up.” In antiquity the altar – more a barbecue pit than a dining table – was the place where blood was spilled, flesh roasted, incense oil and grain were burned. It was a place of bloody sacrifice.

Now God calls us to gather around this dining table-turned-altar. It is our lives lived in common, with and for each other that God desires to be placed on this altar under the signs of bread and wine. It is our hearts -our very selves- that God longs for us to lift up at this altar. We give to God our hearts, baked into this bread. We give our lives -all the pain and promise, joys and sorrows wrung from us like this wine crushed from grapes. All this is put on the altar and God accepts it and makes it holy and gives it back to us as the Body and Blood of Jesus. The bread, the wine, we – the world – all is changed here.

To come to this table is to come to Christ.

That is what we name this table: Christ. On the day of the dedication, the bishop sprinkled this altar with water, slathered it with a mixture of olive oil and perfume called chrism, robed it in fine linen and set candles around it. Sound familiar? We, too, on the day of our baptism were washed with water, anointed with oil, robed in fine garments and entrusted with light – we became Christians, other Christ’s, an altar of sacrifice, a banquet table for the hungry, the homeless, etc. This consecrated altar stands here, Christ in our midst, center of our life, our life lived for the sake of the world.

- ❖ How is your life Christ’s? How is this altar your life?

- ❖ What do you need to lay on it? What do you hold back from it?

- ❖ You are invited to do some gesture of prayer that speaks of your relationship with Christ; with this altar.

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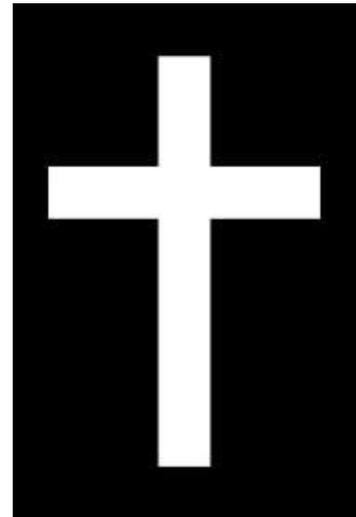
THE CROSS

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn spent years in a brutal and dehumanizing Gulag of Soviet Russia. He writes in the *Gulag Archipelago* that after his conversion to Christ, he began to notice how "...slavery nurtures in you the shoots of contradictory feelings...formerly he never forgave anyone, judged people without mercy, never gave praise to people." He wrote: "Now I understand and realize my own weakness – the weakness of others. My soul, which was dry, now is ripened from suffering." Years later in his life he was able to say: "Bless You, Prison!"

We have stories of our own of growing through an illness, a death of a parent, spouse, etc.

Terry Anderson in his book, *Den of Lions*, writes about forgiving his Iranian prison guards. "He kneels outside my cell and prays to Allah, merciful and compassionate. I know too well the darker urges in myself, the violence and selfishness. I have seen little in him I can't recognize...I am tempted to believe there really is a devil in him, some malefic independent force that makes him less or other than a man. That is too easy and too dangerous an answer; it is how so many evils come to be. I must reject, abhor, and fight against these acts and acknowledge that they're not inhuman – just the opposite. We cannot separate the things we do from what we are; hate the sin and love the sinner is not a concept I'll ever understand. I will never love him – I am not Christ. I will try to achieve forgiveness, because I know that in the end, as always, Christ was right." "Father forgive them, they know not what they do."

- ❖ Stand near the cross as Mary and John. How does it feel?
- ❖ Stand at a distance like the Roman soldiers. How does it feel?
- ❖ Stand as all the others jeering and calling out. How does it feel?
- ❖ Kneel realizing the gift you have been given. How does it feel?
- ❖ Prostrate yourself on the floor in the form of the cross. Where does it take you?
- ❖ What in your own words can you say: Bless you, sin, for being in my life. Bless you, suffering, for being in my life. Bless you, _____, for being in my life.



GENUFLECT/BOW

When we enter this church of St. Paul's we genuflect to the tabernacle. After we are sent forth, we genuflect to the tabernacle which holds the Body Christ.

(When we enter church for liturgy, we genuflect if the tabernacle is right behind the altar. If the tabernacle is to the side and the altar is right in front of us, then we bow.)

When we bow to Christ/genuflect to Christ, we admit our dependence on him. With our bodies we revere him. In the gesture we pledge our lives to its purpose. We consent to share this meal of broken bread and poured out wine in order to become the sacrifice we receive.

We bow at the name of Jesus; we bow at "and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man" in the Nicene Creed.

At the Consecration of the Mass: If we are standing, we are to bow when the Presider genuflects.

We bow to the Body of Christ and to the Blood of Christ. The Church wants us to receive both the Body and the Blood of Christ. When we do not receive the Blood of Christ, we still should bow before walking by Christ.

How are we to bow? The church says we bend slowly, without looking up. We pause for a moment, we rise, to stand and face the object of our bow, our hearts in the right place. Bowing is more than ritual. It is a way of learning how to live in right relationship with the mystery that surrounds us, pervades us. As we bow in humility and awe, then God raises us up in wonder and joy. When the circumstances of our lives double us over, and threaten to break us, we rely on the agility that bowing before God affords us. This bowing and rising becomes the movement of living and dying and living anew.

- ❖ Please go to different parts of the church building. Bow/genuflect.
- ❖ Pray the bow/the genuflection. How does it feel?
- ❖ Who do you need to bow to/with?
- ❖ Who in your family/neighborhood would it be hard to bow to/with? Why?
- ❖ How is God speaking with you in your bow?



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THE LITURGY OF THE WORD

The Liturgy lives out a story in a story-deprived world. Liturgy is not a once-upon-a-time story we merely watch others perform. We are the characters in this story, participants in the divine whose beginning and sending has been written by Jesus himself.

As John Shea says, "Story turns our pain into narrative so we can bear it; we turn our ecstasy into narrative so we can prolong it. We tell stories to live."

Three Scriptures are proclaimed each week: one from the Old Testament, one from the New Testament which is called an epistle (letters), and one from the Gospels. We also sing a Psalm. The readings are in a three-year cycle that we may take in to our lives the whole biblical story: creation and fall, Abraham and Sarah's gift of faith, Moses and Exodus' gift of freedom, the Messiah's coming, the Holy Spirit being poured out on the church and us, and the second coming of the kingdom.

We are not "attending a service," or simply "hearing a story." We are entering a story – a story in which we play a part. We are the people who share in God's very life. We are the people sent forth to proclaim God's story and invite others into the grand story.

"The Word of the Lord." This phrase is powerful. Yes, the lector is referring to what she/he has just proclaimed – this "word" in the lectionary, but when she/he – a baptized, anointed Christian – looks at it – an assembly of the same – in the eyes and says this, she/he is saying more. She/he is saying her/his name. She/he is the word of the Lord, the living, breathing utterance of God here and now. She/he is also saying our name. We are the word of the Lord. Hearing the word of the Lord is a call to let it in our gut, let it kick at our insides; it burns and rips and will not be held back. We become the word for the world.



"Thanks be to God." Now that we are the word of the Lord, all other words fail us, except: "thanks." This word in us and our being word is not our doing, not our reward, not even our just dessert. This is all pure grace (love). Our thanks is saying and meaning: "Yes, I accept the call." Yes, I will pray, study, live and be this word for the world. "The Word of the Lord." "Yes, thanks be to God."

- ❖ Stand, sit, or kneel at the Ambo with the Word. Go and sit in the pew, pick up the readings for Sunday. Read them slowly and reflect. What word is planted in you, what does it call forth from you? Name it.
- ❖ When you are ready, please pray: May the word I prayed tonight and will hear proclaimed on Sunday, live in me, may I be the word I have named for the world, this week and always. Amen.

THE BODY AND THE BLOOD OF CHRIST

Think of it! It is not only the consecrated bread to which the Presider/Extraordinary Minister of the Holy Eucharist refers when we hear: "The Body of Christ." It is that and more. With God, there is always more! It is us, the church, as well. It is to this action of sharing, of feeding and being food that is contained in "The Body of Christ." To accept such a great mystery – that this bread, as ordinary as it is, has become Christ's Body; that I, unworthy as I am, have become Christ's body; that giving and receiving this body builds and sustains Christ's body – to accept such a mystery we can only pray, "Amen." Let it be done to us, to me, according to your word.

Another minister presents to all of us and to each of us "poured out blood of Christ." The minister says "The Blood of Christ." We hear in those words salvation, forgiveness and our destiny changes us forever. I take the chalice from you who have already drunk this precious blood and I drink, and another drinks, and another, until all have done so. That baptismal bond of dying to self is drawn even tighter. I am one with Christ and one with all. Your heartaches, struggles, pouring out of your life are mine. Mine are yours. And all is Christ's.

We are changed and are changing. We become Christ's body, broken for the world that is obese with materialism and still dying of malnutrition. We become Christ's blood poured out in sacrifice for the sake of a world drowning in division and still dying of thirst, for unity and communion. Such a transformation, such a transubstantiation of bread and wine, of you, of me, of the church, of us – such change is possible because Christ says so: "Do this memory of me."

Do this! Made bold by this command, we go the altar that is Christ. We pray: "Send you Spirit upon these gifts to make them holy, that they may become" – and by sharing them that we may be..."the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, at whose command we celebrate this Eucharist." Then we will answer "Amen" to who we receive and who we are becoming.

- ❖ Please kneel, sit, prostrate yourself in front of the tabernacle. Be in awe of Jesus who wants this intimate love with you, who invites you to be him in the world and for the world.
- ❖ What do you need to do in your own life to move deeper into this intimacy that Jesus wants with you?
- ❖ Name a specific action. Write down the steps you need to take to begin to move to make this action part of your life.

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SILENCE

(Please go into the chapel – sit in the pew – let silence be on the inside as well as outside.)

With God, there are different kinds of silence. There was the potent silence before God said, “Let there be...” There was the guilty silence of Adam and Eve when God asked, “Where were you when I called to you?” There was the utter silence of the Sabbath when Jesus rested in the tomb.

In the liturgy we are silent, silent together. We are silent together, actively quiet, purposely still.

We are silent before liturgy begins, in order to be present to each other and find God. God is with us always and often we fail to hear God in our noisy living. So before we wrestle with God in the Liturgy of the Word and Liturgy of the Eucharist, we are silent. “Be still and know that I am God.”

We are silent at the words: “Let us pray.” We hear this call to prayer several times in the liturgy. We pray and pray hard for all who we promised to pray for, for our family, our world, yes, even ourselves. So when the silence is broken with: “Almighty and ever living God.” “Lord our God...” one voice speaks all our longings, sorrow, depth of being and we all seal the prayer with “Amen.”



We are silent at the end of the readings, after the homily. It is so God can speak to us. We listen together for the voice our very lives depend on.

Sometimes we are silent when the gifts are brought to the altar. We take the time to lay ourselves on the altar with the bread and wine. We are silent after being fed and when all have drunk from the chalice of salvation. We are silently caught up in the mystery of faith.

The communal silence of the liturgy plants seeds of peace in our souls, so that in the noise of everyday life, we can find a still center inside to hear the voice of God.

I need to learn silence. I will.... in order to hear the voice of God.

One final thought...If we practice being silent, being silent together, being silent with God, then when death comes, we will be less afraid. For we know in practicing silence, death's silence is but a momentary hush before “Holy, Holy, Holy.” We will find our true voice and God will listen.