

Incarnate Word Tract Series #12
“I Will Go unto the Altar of God”

The Altar in History

In every Lutheran Church building, the center and focus of attention is the Holy Altar.

Throughout the entire recorded history of God’s people, the Altar has been the center of worship. From the very time of Cain and Abel, the Altar of God has played an indispensable part in worship. In the Tabernacle and later in the temples of Israel, Altars were constructed according to detailed instructions from God Himself. For it was on these Altars that the priests were to offer sacrifices to pre-figure the one supreme Sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ. And in the New Testament Church, the Altar maintained its central significance; for gathered around the Altar, the New Israel offered its Eucharistic Sacrifice to the Holy Trinity.

The Significance of the Altar

In a Christian Church, the Altar is in itself a symbol of Christ, for it is at the Altar that He imparts Himself to His People. Christ’s very Body and Blood are given for the remission of sins and strength in faith and life. This gracious gift in itself makes the Altar of supreme importance.

In turn, the people who here receive the fruits of Christ’s Sacrifice, offer their sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to Him. It is on the Altar that Christ’s Sacrifice once again becomes present. Consequently, in words and actions and intentions, Christ’s people offer themselves, though imperfect, in union with Him Who offered the one perfect Sacrifice. It is at the Altar, and only at the Altar, that they “do this in remembrance” of Him.

It is also at the Altar that the Sacred Scriptures are read, that Holy Absolution is given, that the gifts of Holy Ordination and Confirmation are bestowed and that Holy Matrimony is solemnized.

Reverence toward the Altar

Because of the sacred significance of the Holy Altar, various customs and practices have evolved in the course of Christian history. There is, of course, no intrinsic holiness in the material of the Altar itself, but because of what it signifies, Christian people have always treated the Altar with reverence.

The Altar is laudably constructed of the best materials – preferably of marble – to accentuate its importance.

The Altar is consecrated in a special liturgical rite to set it aside for holy use.

The Altar is traditionally covered on the top and on all sides by linen and other materials – a very ancient symbol of respect.

Above the Altar stands the Crucifix, the symbol of the Sacrifice whose benefits we receive at the Altar.

The Altar is never used for storage of church supplies, for this would detract from its special significance.

For many centuries, Christians have acknowledged the Altar with at least a profound bow when approaching or leaving the Altar or when passing its center.

It is most proper to suspend a sanctuary lamp before or near the Altar to call attention to its centrality.

No superfluous objects – such as flower vases, needless books, cleaning supplies, etc. – ought ever be placed on the Altar itself lest these detract from its sacred significance.

But most important of all, Christian people have held the Altar in special reverence because it is in the Blessed Sacrament celebrated on this Altar that they receive their Lord and Savior with the forgiveness of sins and all other benefits of His Passion. Thus the Christian Altar symbolizes the very heart of the Christian's faith and life.