

Chapter v: *Facing the altar.*

MASS IS DINNER. Dinners require tables. Tables are necessary equipment in church.

About these facts there is a good deal more to be said. This chapter of *The Freeze-Frame Mass* is going to be entirely tabular. It's going to be about God outside ourselves, God on the table. For the whole business of Mass is shaped by the table at its centre, wrapped around the table like a cloth. If we want to comprehend Mass, we have to comprehend the table and what God does for us there (Psalm xxiii⁵):

Paras mihi mensam

Inungis oleo caput meum; calix meus uberrimus est.

Thou hast readied a table in front of me,

Thou hast anointed my head, my chalice overflows.

Tabulating God.

MASS reiterates the Last Supper, an evening feast served to thirteen men, twenty centuries ago, on a goodly-sized wooden Table-Top. Perhaps they used some sort of trestle, rigged up for the holiday banquet in that rented room. Certainly on our reredos you can make out a *bas-relief* of the Last Supper which shows four sets of trestle-legs under a big board of planks (and a badly creased tablecloth, obviously brought to the Upper Room folded up in a bag).

If you visit the Lateran basilica in Rome you'll see this very Table-Top mounted high on the north transept wall, in an immense forty-foot

frame of gilded metal, with beaten-bronze angels soaring about it, canopies, hanging lamps, precious stones, bursting metallic rays – whatever struck the baroque imagination (not incorrectly) as likely to inspire dramatic awe.

This Lateran table-top is not the real Table-Top, in the sense of being archæologically the same bit of timber, but it really is the slab of wood that for a thousand years believers (not many of them blankly credulous) venerated *as* the Last Supper board. There's nothing stupid about that. Why shouldn't imagination seize on a particular object to express the [particularity](#) of our salvation? For we are in fact reconciled to God through a particular Man Who, 197 decades back, used a particular piece of bread and a particular cup to give Himself to us on a particular Table. We long for the Grail, the original Cup; we are moved to come across in the Lateran what has long been hailed as the original Table. We are seriously moved: it is *not* like the whimsical charm of finding, say, King Arthur's Round Table. Objects to do with the redemption of our species are literally sacred, and therefore staggering. They keep our mind fixed on the fact that the Last and First Supper really happened – and really happens. It's an actual dinner party for friends. A table is required

The focus of every Christian church is thus its dining table, a continuation of the trestle-top from which, one Thursday in spring A.D. 29, Christ offered Himself, loaf and wine-cup, for the remaking of the cosmos. In all Christian churches there is this piece of furniture, and it still functions as a dining table. Our table bears candles and a white table-cloth; our priest, the head waiter, lays out on it silverware, napkins and supplies; he breaks, pours, and serves from it; and he cleans it up afterward. For Christ warned us against trivialising the Eucharistic fact into spiritual inwardness: *caro enim mea vera est cibus et sanguis meus vere est potus*, He insisted: *My Flesh is meat indeed, and My Blood is drink indeed*, (John vi⁵⁵), which is to say *It really is Victuals*. The feast of It is literally a meal; the table-top for the Feast is literally a table-top.

Altars when it alteration finds.

MASS MAY, IF NECESSARY, be celebrated on any flat surface, and in the first centuries, when Mass was an *ad hoc* affair in the courtyards of large private houses, no doubt a table was heaved of the dining room. But once there were permanent Christian churches, there were always special tables in them, set aside for the Sacred Meal and for nothing else. Inevitably these tables inspired a certain awe.

Meanwhile, all around the first Christians, in every village and city, were more-or-less pillar-shaped structures of stone on which sacrifices of fruit or animals or incense were offered to the gods, and on which these offerings were usually burnt. They could be huge enough for the [immolation](#) (a fancy word for sacrifice) of bullocks, but tended to be smallish. They almost always stood in the open air. This stone contraption was called an [altar](#) (from *altus*, a high place).

Every pagan cult had its altars. The Church rejected them all. That tiny minority of Christians killed by the impatient Roman Empire were almost all killed for refusing to go to some civic altar and perform sacrifice – which might mean a gesture as trifling as dropping a pinch of incense into its flames. The Christian martyrs died because they knew that our Faith is the final truth, and they would not regress, even that far, into any lesser cult.

But they also knew Christianity was not *less* a religion than these pagan faiths. They realised that their own priests were also offering religious sacrifice, a sacrifice infinitely *more* real and precious than any other. Christianity's rites were *more* a sacrifice than the elaborate immolation of oxen, with gilded axes, at altars of Zeus. The early Christians were not shy about drawing connections between Mass and pagan sacrifice, those pallid foreshadowing of Mass. (Shyness on this score came much later, at the Reformation.) Christians rejected every pagan altar; a few went so far as to die for that rejection. But even in New Testament times we were insisting *habemus altare, we have an altar* (Hebrews xiii¹⁰).

It was momentous for the Church to adopt this term. By saying *altar*, she confessed that at Mass the Holy Table, even only a borrowed dining-room table, isn't just a useful surface for serving a dinner-party. It

isn't just a board on which to feast on What Christ gives us. It is also an altar of sacrifice on which we offer back to God the best thing, the only acceptable offering, we have: His Son's Body. To use the word *altar* of the Christian table advertises a belief in Eucharistic sacrifice; the offering to God of the tangible Body. As long as we use the word *altar* seriously, we can't lose sight of our belief in the sacrifice of the Mass; and as long as we hold to that belief, we can't go far wrong.

The altar is stone.

WE'RE UP TO THE SIXTH chapter of these notes, which describe, with ponderous deliberation, the Christian Mysteries as they are celebrated at Ascension and St Agnes. By now we've seen, in very slow slow motion, our altar flicked with holy water, our altar kissed, our altar incensed. For ten pages now we've kept the priest standing at one corner of the altar, facing the altar, frozen. The time has come to talk about altars.

Physicalities first. A pagan altar was an upright stone oblong for offering, by burning, some sacrifice to the gods; so it was usually a smallish affair. A Christian altar is much larger. That's a weighty and important detail. For on Maundy Thursday God and man sat down to dine together. This mutual feasting has never ended. Here is the board at which the ultimate meal is offered, and we share it with God. Such sharing had never occurred to any pagan, but we know it to be the truth. Therefore our altar virtually reproduces the largeness of the Last Supper Table-Top, which (as we can see in the Lateran and on our reredos) must have been a biggish affair. The Table is, mystically speaking, large enough to feed mankind, and it's actually big enough to sit thirteen men. It is, to be pedestrian as an accountant, around three and a half feet high. In lands where inches are used in measurement, an altar's traditional height is exactly 39 inches, no doubt because of that fine Trinitarian 3 and 9: three, and three-threes. Its length depends on the grandeur necessary for Masses in a particular church: the more glad pomp, the more table-space needed. (Our original altar, splendid work by Henry Vaughn, was ingeniously lengthened in 1956, by swinging the carved ends around so

they faced outward, and rebuilding the solid structure behind; note the richness of its carving.)

In what sense is an altar solid? Because the altar is a table is for the mutual feast, it is a table big enough to accommodate a dinner-party. Because the Holy Table is an altar, it is naturally of stone, for that's what altars are: solid, permanent edifices, strong enough to bear offerings and to have sacrifices consumed upon them. Once Christians started thinking of Mass as sacrifice and, therefore, the Table as an altar, the Table naturally began to look like a altar. Stone replaced wood. And now – or rather, until the train-crash of Christian sensibility in the 1960s – altars must by law be of stone. Even if most of the structure is, say, wooden, a stone *mensa* (Latin for *table*) still has to be set within the table-top, and the actual offering of Mass is performed on that stone.

The Table where Christ feeds us Himself, is also the permanent altar where we offer Him to God, as a sacrifice acceptable to wipe out the faults of the world.

The altar is tomb and (ideally) a reliquary.

THE TABLE IS AN ALTAR of sacrifice; this stone altar is also a dinner-table. Good. But there is more to be said of it.

In the first centuries Mass was sometimes celebrated on the [tomb](#) of a martyr – very occasionally; but these occasions made a great impression on believers, for martyrdom proved that the Church was absolutely serious, not just one more thrilling cult among many. The martyrs were uniquely eminent. Each martyrdom was a new revelation of God's presence and God's strength in feeble humanity; each martyr was eternally close to God, and by being physically close to us brought us (in turn) closer to eternity. The Christian prophet who produced the Apocalypse cried *I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God!* (vi⁹); and many other believers were moved by this idea of having those rare, glorious ones (who were often irritating enough while alive, but who had after all offered themselves) bodily present when the Body was offered. Death, for Christians, is portal of life; tombs are doors into infinite vigour; altars have about them the happy air of

sepulchres. Once the Church was free and church-building could begin, Christians went to fantastic lengths to erect churches over the martyrs' graves, positioning the high altars of those churches directly above the bodies themselves – making solid that this vision of martyrs under the altar and the divine Sacrifice. Thus a whole side of the Vatican hill in Rome was dug away so that the altar of St Peter's could be raised exactly above Peter's bones, resting deep in the hillside. *Tu es Petrus, Thou art Peter*, Christ had told him, punningly (Matthew xvi¹⁸), *and on this rock – et super hanc petrum – I will build My Church, ædificio ecclesiam meam*. One way we've paid sly and touching tribute to that great saying is by making it literally true. The central altar of Christendom (where Peter's courtly successor Benedict XII allowed his cardinals to take snuff) sits over the Fisherman's grave.

Eventually, scruples about disturbing the remains of distinguished martyrs, and other heroic believers, faded away. Their remains were dug up, chopped up, sold, stolen, forged, multiplied, moved about and stowed under innumerable altars. Eventually every mediæval altar was required to contain – grisly word, fine thing – [relics](#). All the altars of the Roman Catholic Church were reliquaries, containers of relics, until her great loss of nerve (she abandoned this requirement in 1977).

That Ascension and St Agnes has no relics under its high altar is a flaw. We have, instead, those seven great heroes painted *above* the altar – not as decoration, but as a plea for their fellowship and presence with us. But Christianity is the unsqueamish religion of physical presence, not just of invocation. There's only one way for dead heroes to be physically in attendance, which is as shavings of bone. Such fragments are ridiculously slight in themselves; but then we are even more ridiculously slight in ourselves. What we hope for these dubious, feeble, not-wholly-clean bodies of ours (deification, infinite life with Christ) has already overtaken those slithers and tatters of matter; so why should we not reverence them? And how can we reverence what we sadly do not have?

The altar is Christ's cross, tomb and throne; it is even Christ.

WE HOPE THAT OUR FEEBLE BODY may be *sown in dishonour ... raised in glory ... sown in weakness ... raised in power* (I Corinthians xv⁴³), and the reason – the very reasonable reason – we hope this is that we think something of the sort happened to Christ’s Body. Indeed we see Christ’s Body both broken and glorious in the Mass. *This corruptible shall . . . put on incorruption, and this mortal . . . put on immortality* (xv⁵⁴), which is what we observe occurring each Sunday on the altar. So that is what our altar shows, and what our altar *is*: not 39 by 37 by 142 inches of gray granite (these are not guesses – I have measured it), but: Christ’s [Cross](#), the thing on which we see the Body broken; and Christ’s [Tomb](#), in which we see the broken Body laid; and Christ’s [Throne](#), on which He is lifted up and acclaimed by His people.

Behind our altar, on the reredos, are Thursday’s events. That carving declares this to be the table where the Last Supper is repeated. But carved on the front of our altar are advertisements of events of Friday – tools of violence, almost gruesomely explicit: evidence of a killing.¹ This is not only the table for the meal of Thursday: it is Mount [Calvary](#), where the slaying happened on Friday, the high place where Christ’s unspeakable act of giving is offered once more to God.

And our altar is more than Christ’s Cross or Tomb.

When God’s people fled through Red Sea and wilderness to their Promised Land and almost died of thirst, their prophet cracked a protruding desert rock so that inexhaustible water burst out; thereafter, while they wandered, this kindly rock wandered with them, permanently faithful in its shiftiness. – Christian thinking has a bold way with Old Testament stories; fundamentalism (the fanatical attempt to believe these legends historically true) is the dingiest and most eccentric

¹ The three nails and the crown of thorns are on a small shield to the left, between the central flowery cross, and the monogram **ΑΩ**, Alpha-Omega (the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet: for God is eternal and final, the beginning and the end). On the matching shield, bottom right, between the cross and Christ’s monogram, **IHS**, you might be able to make out the ladder with which Christ’s Body was lowered, the spear which pierced His Side traversing the pole and sponge with which He was given vinegar, the hammer that drove the nails in and the pliers that tugged them out. – Incidentally, the device on the far left (which used to be the side of the altar before its enlargement in 1956) is the Chi-Ro, the monogram combining the first letters of Christ’s Name in Greek, **Χ** and **Ρ**, to form a cross. On the right is the Star of David, sign of our Faith’s Jewish heritage.

of heresies. St Paul doesn't hesitate to read this fairy-tale as an apparition of Mass: the people of the Exodus *were all baptised . . . in the sea; and did all eat the same spiritual meat; and did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of the spiritual Rock which followed them, and that Rock was Christ* (I Corinthians x¹⁻⁴). *Petram autem erat Christus, that Rock was Christ* : for us, even more than for them, the Rock from which bursts inexhaustible living drink (John iv¹⁰⁻¹⁴), mingled Blood and water flowing out of cracked Body (John xix³⁴), *is Christ*. Thus our stony [altar is Christ](#) – in that it is the Rock with which He gushes life. From this Rock comes the chalice, transformed from mingled wine and water, on which we subsist. Therefore when a Christian altar is built, five crosses are cut into it, as five wounds were cut into Christ's body to save the world. When it is consecrated, a bishop anoints it with chrism, which is to say he rubs it with oil, for chrism is the mark of royalty and priesthood, and the very title *Christ* means *the Chrismated, the Anointed One*. The altar stands covered with a 'fine linen cloth', which is, as I say, a table-cloth, fifteen foot long, requiring (the altar guild tell me) an hour's ironing. But it's also a reiteration of the shroud which covered Christ's Body when slain, and in which He recovered life.

Thus an altar is not merely church furniture. The Church is not merely a human institution. The fallibly human Peter, on whom she was raised, was used as foundation material because the one Rock decided to employ him. *Petram autem erat Christus*: that Rock was Christ. Church is built on the bedrock of Christ. In every parish church that bedrock breaks the surface and presents to our stare a fountain of life, permanent as stone – which is, indeed, made of stone.

That's what an altar *is*; this is why we reverence it.

This is why we pray *toward* it.

High and open places, and facing the light.

WHEN THE JUVENILE, BABY-FACED Winston Churchill (already discernibly like his heroic, aged, baby-faced self) arrived at boarding school, a dreadful master thrust a Latin primer into his podgy hand, commanding him to memorise the cases of *mensa*.

Mensa, a table; *mensa*, vocative, O table; *mensam*, a table; *mensæ*, of a table; . . . “What does it mean, sir?” asked little Churchill. “Mensa, O table, – you would use that in addressing a table, in invoking a table,” blustered the brute. And Churchill blurted out in honest amazement: “But I never do.”² Such were the harrowing effects of three centuries of English Protestantism.

We ought to want to address our prayers *toward* the altar. God is revealed to us there; there the Body of Christ comes and goes. Mass is celebrated on an altar, and all the ceremonies and prayers of Mass are aligned in that direction. The altar gives us an axis of devotion, a focus outside our own minds, and in church we point our prayers beyond ourselves at it. We’re not superstitious or idiotic; it is not that God is there and absent elsewhere. But if He reveals Himself at all, He reveals Himself particularly, in one place more than another; therefore we regard the material stone block where He is revealed with spiritual reverence.

There is no more Christian gesture than looking for God in a particular place. Any theist knows God is everywhere; the Christian, uniquely, knows that for us He also put Himself *somewhere* (Bethlehem, Nazareth, Calvary). He is universal; but out of love of mankind – of each particular human being, one by one – He has also made Himself particular, pitching His tent among us (John i¹⁴).

I said two chapters back that thoroughly to understand incense is to understand the Catholic Faith. It is even truer that someone has successfully come to grips with the Faith when he’s properly awed by our habit of facing a stone block to pray.

O mensa, mensa, mensa!

High and open places, and facing the light.

MOREOVER, THE DIRECTION MATTERS because the altar is not merely at one end of the church; it is at the *east* end of the church.

Just as the cycle of Christian stories – Jesus’ birth, life, death, rising – have been pasted onto the natural cycle of the year, so the intense sense of God’s presence *over there*, around this church’s altar, has

² *My Early Life*, p. 11.

been pasted onto the planet. From the earliest days it was commanded that a church should be oblong, “with its head toward the east” (*Apostolic Constitutions*); Christian churches were “high and open places, and facing the light” (Tertullian, *ad Valent.* iii). The axis of prayer toward the altar was expanded globally: prayer should be toward the east, and so the altar should be at the east end. Churches were [orientated](#), a word which meant precisely *built eastward* (before it, like so many words, was diluted into meaning *aligned toward anything*). The *façade* of a church faces west. The worshipper, entering the building, progresses further and further toward the sacred as he moves along the eastward axis.

This habit of [praying eastward](#) is older than Christianity – as are candles, vestments, flowers, altars, servers, processions, bells, relics, holy books, hymns, altarpieces, ablutions, votive lights, sacred statues and incense. We should hope so. What would be the point of attempting gestures of devotion if they were not within natural human language of worship? If we are going to pray to some purpose, we need to pray outward, and if we are going to pray outward, it’s fairly obvious to pray toward where the light comes from each morning. Since pagan Greeks built temples facing west, so that when they entered and gazed on Apollo or Dionysus or Aphrodite they’d be gazing eastward, how could we not make the same gesture for Christ – true God of Reason, true God of Wine, true God of Love?

Of course as a matter of geographical fact churches can’t always be aligned this way. Ascension and St Agnes has to defer, not only to compass, natural human impulse and law of the Church Universal, but to Monsieur L’Enfant’s quirky cobweb of streets, radiating out from those circles round which Washingtonians drive so badly. Massachusetts Avenue runs pretty much north-west, so our church, stretching back from the road, is aligned northward. But that’s a pedantic detail. Our altar is orientated. It lies to our ‘liturgical east’. Behind our altar’s an alleyway connecting 12th Street and 13th Street: we are not *naïve*. But nonetheless it’s toward our east that we gaze every Sunday, looking out of ourselves, toward the rising Sun.

Paras mihi mensam.

AND HERE'S WHERE WE ARE. At this frozen moment of our almost-infinately-sluggish Mass, the celebrant is about to utter the searing Collect for Purity, which punctures through every pose of body and mind to the innermost essence of the worshipper. We are about to tear open to God our internal depths. But we dare to do this because He *is*, because He is outside us: and what we offer now, as the priest begins to utter that formidable Collect, is this gesture of externality, this eastward stare. We are not huddling but facing, all of us, *toward*.

Here's a map of the moment. When offering the Collect of Purity (and all future collects) the altar party array themselves like *this*:



A heathenish friend I showed this diagram to a few days back sniffed: “Huh! *exactly* like a gameplan in soccer.” Here are celebrant, deacon and subdeacon marked as emblematic chasuble, two-striped dalmatic and one-striped tunicle, as if they were players mapped by numbered jerseys. Here are acolytes 1 and 2 guarding the credence table at the edge of the field, here are altar-steps drawn precise as the twenty-yard line Why not? Mass is high sport. This is the collect ‘play.’ But my friend’s sneer shows he has no soul. This isn’t just a functional blueprint, it’s theology made visible, it’s art, a fragment of dance, a sketch of poetry – *Paras mihi mensam, Thou hast readied a table in front of me!* Here’s how mankind fits himself to speak directly to his Maker: he lines up in perfect order of Orders to face the Table of revelation, with its fivefold crucifying marks.

Orientation.

I HOPE (I’M NOT SURE) that amidst all these details of choreography a certain theological idea is clear: that the altar forces us to look at a [particular place](#) for God, a place not within ourselves. Christians worship

a God Who *is*, Who is outside us as well as in; Whose Son, as a matter of historical fact, once offered Himself on a certain table; which table we have in our churches, and call an *altar*, because sacrifice is offered on it more literally and physically than on ancient pagan altars; and that we look toward this material altar with awe, as Christ's throne and place of presence. This altar is eastward, so we pray by physical direction – for purposes of Mass, Godward. We orientate toward the revelation of God on the altar.