

**A ZENIT DAILY DISPATCH****Altars, Dedications and Relics****When a new mensa is installed**

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Answered by Legionary of Christ Father Edward McNamara, professor of liturgy and dean of theology at the Regina Apostolorum university.

**Q:** Four years ago, our parish priest made some changes in the design and overall appearance of the altar table in our parish church. What appears to be the altar table that was blessed and dedicated some 20 years ago is now contained inside the newly built altar table, and one cannot see a trace any more of the “old” altar table. Recently, our parish priest requested a relic, and he plans that this relic be “deposited” in the altar table. My question is, having a “new” altar, should there be a “re-dedication” of the altar table? Or should it follow the rite for the dedication of an altar? Is there a special rite for the depositing of a relic of a saint/martyr? — P.B., Naga City, Philippines

**A:** There are two questions that need to be addressed. First, the necessity or not of a new rite of dedication. Second, the rite for deposition of relics.

The first question would be covered by Canon 1238, which states that the loss of blessing of an altar is covered by Canon 1212. To wit:

“Sacred places lose their dedication or blessing if they have been destroyed in large part, or if they have been turned over permanently to profane use by decree of the competent ordinary or in fact.”

Now, in this case, the altar has certainly not been destroyed, so in principle, a new dedication would not be required. This would only be necessary if the alterations to the original altar were so extensive that we would be dealing with an essentially new altar.

Likewise, the restoration of the altar happened four years ago whereas a new dedication ceremony would have been almost immediate.

As the Ceremonial of Bishops, No. 922, says:

“Since an altar becomes sacred principally by the celebration of the Eucharist, in conformity to this truth the celebration of Mass on a new altar before it has been dedicated should be carefully avoided, so that the Mass of Dedication may also be the first Eucharist celebrated on the altar.”

Given that I have only our reader’s description, I think I must defer to the parish priest’s judgment on this matter. He clearly considered that the original consecration was not lost.

The question of relics is a different one. Canon law states:

“Canon 1237 §2. The ancient tradition of placing relics of martyrs or other saints under a fixed altar is to be preserved, according to the norms given in the liturgical books.”

The Bishop’s Ceremonial is more detailed in No. 866:

“The tradition in the Roman liturgy of placing relics of martyrs or other saints beneath the altar should be preserved, if possible. But the following should be noted.

“a) Such relics should be of a size sufficient for them to be recognizable as parts of human bodies. Hence excessively small relics of one or more saints must not be placed beneath an altar;

“b) The greatest care must be taken to determine whether the relics in question are authentic. It is better for an altar to be dedicated without relics than to have relics of doubtful authenticity placed beneath it;

“c) A reliquary must not be placed on the altar or set into the table of the altar, but placed beneath the table of the altar, as the design of the altar permits.”

Therefore it would be understood that relics to be placed under an altar would need to be of certain significance.

The above norm also explicitly excludes the practice customary in recent centuries of inserting relics into a specially created cavity within the table (the *mensa*) of an altar or altar stone. Of course, it does not require their removal if already there.

The norms also mean that It is no longer permissible to place the relics of saints in the base of a movable altar.

Hence, since it would be necessary to obtain some significant first-class relics of a canonized saint, the altar is already dedicated, and relics are no longer required, I would say that it is unlikely that the bishop would permit that the altar be remodeled so as to insert them below the altar table.

The usual rites do not foresee any celebration to insert relics in an already consecrated altar but only in a new altar.

This might occasionally happen but is very rare — for example, when the body of a newly beatified or canonized person is placed under a previously existing altar. These ceremonies, however, are more often than not done in private, as was the case when Saints John XXIII and John Paul II were placed in their present definitive locations under pre-existing altars in St. Peter’s Basilica. Neither altar has been, at least to my knowledge, rededicated.

However, should the parish priest manage to obtain a relic of such significance that it would warrant the construction of a practically new altar, and perhaps even a change of church patron, then the rite to be followed would be that of the Dedication of an Altar as described in Nos. 918-953 of the Ceremonial of Bishops and chapters 4 and 6 of the Rite of Dedication of a Church and an Altar.

Barring this, there are other ways of venerating the relics of saints in churches other than placing them under the altar. The Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy has the following indications:

“236. The Second Vatican Council recalls that ‘the Saints have been traditionally honored in the Church, and their authentic relics and images held in veneration,’ The term ‘relics of the Saints’ principally signifies the bodies — or notable parts of the bodies — of the Saints who, as distinguished members of Christ’s mystical Body and as Temples of the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 3, 16; 6, 19; 2 Cor 6, 16)(324) in virtue of their heroic sanctity, now dwell in Heaven, but who once lived on earth. Objects which belonged to the Saints, such as personal objects, clothes, and manuscripts are also considered relics, as are objects which have touched their bodies or tombs such as oils, cloths, and images.

“237. The *Missale Romanum* reaffirms the validity ‘of placing the relics of the Saints under an altar that is to be dedicated, even when not those of the martyrs.’ This usage signifies that the sacrifice of the members has its origin in the Sacrifice of the altar, as well as symbolizing the communion with the Sacrifice of Christ of the entire Church, which is called to witness, even to the point of death, fidelity to her Lord and Spouse.

“Many popular usages have been associated with this eminently liturgical cultic expression. The faithful deeply revere the relics of the Saints. An adequate pastoral instruction of the faithful about the use of relics will not overlook:

“— ensuring the authenticity of the relics exposed for the veneration of the faithful; where doubtful relics have been exposed for the veneration of the faithful, they should be discreetly withdrawn with due pastoral prudence;

“— preventing undue dispersal of relics into small pieces, since such practice is not consonant with due respect for the human body; the liturgical norms stipulate that relics must be ‘of a sufficient size as make clear that they are parts of the human body’;

“— admonishing the faithful to resist the temptation to form collections of relics; in the past, this practice has had some deplorable consequences;

“— preventing any possibility of fraud, trafficking, or superstition.

“The various forms of popular veneration of the relics of the Saints, such as kissing, decorations with lights and flowers, bearing them in processions, in no way exclude the possibility of taking the relics of the Saints to the sick and dying, to comfort them or use the intercession of the Saint to ask for healing. Such should be conducted with great dignity and be motivated by faith. The relics of the Saints should not be exposed on the mensa of the altar since this is reserved for the Body and Blood of the King of Martyrs.”

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